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THE UNSEEN PATHS OF THE FOREST

Thirteen Tales about Love and Friendship

2012

“The nobility of the soul does not manifest when man acts properly only because political or family laws demand of him to act nobly, but where, even if man shows himself to be cruel, no existing law punishes him, except for his own conscience.

When man, having no other judge than his own free will, with which he stays alone before his God and Creator, spontaneously driven by his sublime inner love, acts mercifully even toward the smallest animal or being in which life can be surmised, even then his generous action is beneficial and rewarding. Not the fact that you did not trample on a worm, but the awareness that you mastered your passions, obeying at the same time some higher laws of life, is what elevates you above the masses, so that, through the practicing of love and mercy, it will become second nature to you not to deny to your fellowman what you granted to a weak, dependent animal.”

(THE SECRETS OF LIFE, Gottfried Mayerhofer)

THE RABBIT AND THE TURTLE

The rabbit lived together with his rabbit girlfriend in a secret glade, full of flowers of all colors; there was never winter there. The rabbit had several friends in the forest and sometimes he liked to get out of the glade and meet with them, play together, and talk. He always had some fruit or flowers with him, because he was very glad to give little gifts to his friends. Since he was so nice and warm-hearted, all his friends were fond of him and appreciated him. Some of them, who were lonelier, even wished to live with him in his glade full of colorful flowers, but unfortunately, none of them knew the path to it.

Of all the animals, only the little doe rabbit knew the path, but she also knew that their glade must not be stepped on by any foreign foot -- not even by the foot of their best friend -- because even this would be totally unacceptable to that marvelous glade. And if this were to happen, all the flowers there would lose their colors and the grass would suddenly thin, as if winter had come. And then they would have to leave that place, to look for another secret glade, and they had no certainty that there could be yet another secret glade for them in this world.

This is why the doe rabbit decided not to tell anybody about the path, and the rabbit had made the same decision.

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The turtle lived at the edge of the forest. She had no secret glade. She had had one, or rather four, because she was far older than the rabbits ... but she had lost them all, one by one. Her secret glades had a special gift of changing by themselves little by little until at a certain time they seemed as usual as all other glades, and then she couldn't recognize them. She went astray while looking for them until she got exhausted and realized she would never find them.

Luckily, the turtle also had several good friends in the forest, because she also liked very much to meet with them and give them little gifts, just like the rabbit. By happy coincidence, the two had met at a council of the forest animals. That evening, after the end of the meeting, they kept talking for a couple of hours and parted regretfully, as if they were best friends.

After a while, the rabbit developed a habit of leaving for the turtle, in a clearing, a little arrangement made of round river stones. The turtle knew for sure it was a gift for her, because in the middle of the little work there was always a portrait of a turtle. The rabbit also used to bring several of the most fragrant flowers he could find, with which he decorated the arrangement;

although he was often in a hurry, and sometimes even careless, the impression made by his gifts was always delightful.

The turtle had gotten accustomed to the rabbit's attentions. She was always eagerly waiting for them and replied to them happily, by building next to them her own arrangements made of little stones. Using her great experience, she worked slowly, methodically, carefully planning the light and color effects, in order to delight her friend as much as possible, in her turn. At first, she avoided putting flowers into the arrangements, fearing that her message would appear too challenging -- because, unlike the rabbit, she really was a lonely animal, in search of a secret glade. However, in the passage of time, she also began to slip a little delicate flower between the stones. This had been, at the beginning, a sort of friendly challenge: If you give me flowers, I will give you flowers, too ... and we will take turns laughing at the one who seems to be the most serious in this game.

However, the turtle shortly realized that, as opposed to her young friend, she really became too serious to play this way anymore. She wasn't used to showing what she felt, and even less used to showing what she didn't feel, even in jest. In fact, despite her innocent nature and the fact that she had such a strange appearance that nobody in the forest could correctly identify her age, she was an adult animal, who had gone through many hardships and was very cautious in her relationships with the animals of the forest.

Consequently, she realized quite quickly that their daily play could not last too long, lest they risk it not ending well for one or both parties.

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Once she thought these things, the turtle decided to make a last special arrangement for the rabbit. She looked for the most beautiful flower she had seen in the forest in the last days and picked it, then put it at the base of her whole construction. She did so by carefully covering the flower with little colorful river stones, so that the stalk and every petal and leaflet of it would be as well outlined as possible. She knew very well that the flower would fade and turn into earth, but she hoped from the bottom of her soul that the little stones would keep its shape long afterward.

This flower, which she wished to be as durable as herself, had to be the last gift offered to the rabbit. Any other gift after that would not be a creation conceived after the laws of the forest, but an aberrant one, like in a dream, a phantasm born out of her great desire to live once again in a secret glade. She was sure that the rabbit did not deserve to be rewarded in such a way for his friendship.

In no hurry, the turtle finished her work, and then sat down to rest. With a long sigh, she immediately felt like crying, because it seemed to her it would have been better had she never finished. She refrained, however, and looked at the flower between the stones, noticing that the rays of the setting sun falling over it made it shine. She then thought that if the flower looked so beautiful in the sunshine, maybe her decision was also not one of the worst....

Unexpectedly, a white butterfly alighted precisely upon the tip of the turtle's nose, which shook gently to escape the slight itch. The butterfly rose a little in the air, as if pushed by a breath of wind, and then turned back to land with no hesitation on a wide leaf, right in front of one of the turtle's eyes. This time, she could not help taking a look and was very surprised to notice that his almost transparent wings, full of fine iridescences, shaking in the warm summer air, seemed to cover the whole sky. Myriads of thin streamlets of light pulsated and interlaced with each other, permanently changing their nuances and colors.

It was truly one of the most impressive things she had ever seen! After a while, however, she began to feel a pain in her eyes from so much concentration and she closed them for a couple of seconds. When she reopened them, she didn't see the butterfly anymore. She patiently looked around for him, but couldn't find him.

Disappointed, she came back to the clearing and didn't even notice that, entirely lost in her thoughts, she was heading precisely to her flower between the stones. Passing by, she stepped on the edge of one of its petals and looked absentmindedly at the uneven earth she felt beneath her feet. And what amazed her was not the presence of her work, which she had almost forgotten about ... but that of the white butterfly, who was resting motionless on a little stone in the middle of the flower. She closed her eyes and opened them several times to make sure she wasn't wrong.

A few moments later, while she was watching him tensely, the white butterfly rose lightly in a spiral which grew wider and wider, and got lost in the immensity of the air.

What a strange story, the confused turtle said to herself, and decided to take a nap in the shadow of a raspberry bush, because she felt, all of a sudden, very tired. But no sooner had she sat down than a thought, which she felt like a flash of light in her heart, made her jump back to her feet, trembling in every limb. Of course the appearance of the butterfly had not been merely chance! This had been a true gift of The Great Spirit -- a gift more precious than anything an animal could ever offer her!

The joy that followed this discovery made her laugh and frolic through the clearing for an hour, with an energy and a cheerfulness she didn't have even in the most wonderful times of her childhood. All of a sudden, her joy turned into a great peace of mind; and then, the turtle stopped and finally began to reflect again on her condition. For the first time in her long life, she now felt fully reconciled, and not only with herself or with the rabbit or with his girlfriend (whom she didn't even get to meet), but with the whole forest ... and even with all the other forests in the world.

She now knew she had the power not to come back to this clearing, whose mystery made her friend leave his glade all the time. Without realizing it, she had discovered the path to the most secret of the secret glades and, precisely for this wonderful reason, she managed to live on without ever feeling alone again.

THE HEDGEHOGS

Winter was knocking on the door when the scruffy hedgehog received news from his brothers, via a woodpecker, that his mother was very sick and that they asked him to come back home. He was living alone on the edge of the forest, and had no other concern those days than preparing his housing and stocks for winter, so that, when the woodpecker finished her short tale, he pushed a big river stone in front of the entrance, drew several dry branches over his den, and departed worriedly along the brook. By his reckoning, if he didn't halt in the night except to take a rest two or three times, the next day at sunrise he should arrive home.

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When the scruffy hedgehog showed up at his mother's den, he immediately noticed that something strange had happened with it. It seemed to have lessened on all sides, so that now it seemed rather a playground for cubs than a real den. And he couldn't find its entrance anywhere!

"Mom! Mom!...What are you doing there?...Do you need help?" shouted the scruffy hedgehog, terribly frightened. Not the slightest sound could be heard from inside the lair. "Mom, answer, please!" shouted the hedgehog once again and, without waiting too long, he started to dig nervously at the edge of the little construction.

"Brother, stop!" All of a sudden, he heard a strong voice behind him. One of his three elder brothers looked at him, worried, raised on his hind legs, ten steps away from him.

The scruffy hedgehog rushed to welcome the newcomer and they greeted each other happily.

"Mother doesn't live here anymore?" asked the scruffy hedgehog, while his brother was still embracing him. The latter pushed him aside a little and then looked up at him with weeping eyes.

"Mother isn't in our world any more. She passed away last evening...." The scruffy hedgehog drew back, as if he had been hit in the face by an invisible force.

"Poor Mom! She couldn't wait for me ... poor Mom!" he grieved with a strident voice that he couldn't recognize as his own. The elder hedgehog drew closer again and gently put his paw on his brother's head.

“Brother, she thought of you until her last moments. Before dying she told us she asked you to forgive her for not being able to wait for you anymore ... and she also told us not to be sad, because The Great Spirit takes care that all of us meet again, on the other side....”

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Before leaving to live on the other side of the forest, the scruffy hedgehog had had several good friends here where his childhood lair was located. He didn't want to intrude upon his brothers, who all had their families and problems, but he couldn't go back home, either, without seeing his old friends at least once. They had their lairs nearby, so the scruffy hedgehog asked his brothers to announce to his friends that he would wait for them in the coming days in front of his mother's old lair. He didn't want to disturb them too much by looking for them at their homes, because he knew that at least two of them had mates and he also knew that, unfortunately, the females of their kind weren't always happy to have guests.

For the next three days, the scruffy hedgehog spent almost all his time near his mother's lair, but in a turn of events incomprehensible to him, none of his friends showed up. Maybe his brothers had not explained clearly enough where he was waiting, or maybe they hadn't understood that after three days he was really going to go back home. He didn't want to fight with any of his brothers, so he didn't mention these doubts of his, but decided not to waste any more time. He found out from one of his uncles where the homes of his friends were, and then left in a hurry to pay a short visit to each of them.

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The black hedgehog had been his best friend in his childhood. Neither with his brothers, nor with any other acquaintance did the scruffy hedgehog manage to have such long and pleasant talks, full of unusual ideas, which made him detach from all his concerns and worries. As long as he was far from his family and friends, there was nothing he missed more than these meetings with the black hedgehog. In a voice constricted with emotion, he called him in front of his den.

A little nose appeared, quivering, at the entrance of the den, then disappeared, and in its place the delicate but frowning snout of a mother-hedgehog showed up. “You are looking for my husband, I think, stranger?”

The hedgehog also frowned a little. “I don't mean to disturb you; I'm an old friend of his and I would like to....”

“Of course, of course...” she interrupted him hastily, “all of you are his friends! Mind you, he doesn’t have much time for chatting ... I sent him to those blueberry bushes down the valley to collect some fresh fruit for the kids.”

“Thank you -- I won’t keep him too long!” the hedgehog promised shyly, and departed quickly down the path.

“Tell him the little ones are hungry and are eagerly waiting for him!” she cried at his retreating back, with a voice in which irritation could be more clearly discerned than a full moon in the clear night skies.

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The black hedgehog seemed amazed that his old friend had looked for him to talk to him. For a long time he didn’t do anything other than ask him about his life after leaving the family. When the scruffy hedgehog asked him, in his turn, what had happened to him all this time since they last saw each other, his friend stiffened a little, but strove to answer in as detached a tone as possible. “You saw what I’ve been doing, didn’t you, my friend? A wife, children, the family with everyday worries ... not much to tell about.”

“Of course, the family worries, I don’t doubt that...” said the scruffy hedgehog cautiously. “Have you seen our other old friends? Or maybe you’ve made new friends?”

“New friends? I haven’t had time for new ones...” grumbled the black hedgehog. “As far as our friends are concerned, I can tell you there aren’t many of them left! The little hedgehog has become terribly boring, and the strange hedgehog ... what more can I say? He stays inside all day long and if nobody pays him a call, you can rest assured he will not make the effort to look for anybody. You know he used to be quite unusual when we were kids, but now, what can I tell you? He is strangeness personified! I think he cannot even understand himself!”

The scruffy hedgehog looked at him, surprised. In the old days he had never heard his friend say even one bad word about someone else of their kind. And now... now he was speaking in these terms about his best friends -- or anyway, the only friends he still had in his absence. If these two had changed, he must have changed, as well. How would this old friend of his speak of him, were he asked by somebody ... maybe by his wife, for instance?

Feeling that a more and more dangerous shadow of doubt started to grow inside him, the scruffy hedgehog abstained from thinking about these things and addressed his friend again, with a smile.

“Do you know how much I have missed those long talks of ours? I kept trying to make a friend on the other side of the forest with whom I could speak in the way I used to speak with you,

but I didn't meet anyone ... do you understand? I have discovered no creature as interesting as you!"

"Oh, yes ... I seemed very interesting to you back then," the black hedgehog interrupted him impatiently. "We both were at an age when many simple things seemed mysterious and extremely interesting! Do you know what seems interesting to me now?" he asked thoughtfully. The scruffy hedgehog shook his head, delighted. He was prepared to hear great things, to the extent of this maturity which he began to guess at, and which surely surpassed that naïf curiosity that had given rise to all the ideas that had seemed grand to him in the days of old.

"It seems interesting to me to find one day enough food for my kids, and for my wife to be content with me. It seems interesting to me not to get too tired to be able to play a little with the kids before going to bed. It seems interesting to me to enjoy one day without a fight with my wife!" The black hedgehog sighed bitterly and looked up at his friend with his eyes totally devoid of that cheerful glow of youth. "Unfortunately ... as I think you have realized very well in the meanwhile, the life of a mature animal is not too rich in interesting things."

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Depressed, the scruffy hedgehog left for the house of the little hedgehog. He hadn't expected at all to find his best childhood friend so much changed. Well, if this were what a wife and several offspring could bring in the life of an animal, he was determined to remain single till the end of his life. And now he was going to his other friend, who had his own family. He, who once was so merciful, mild, and close to him every time when he had come to complain of his problems (especially those created by his elder brothers) -- could he remain the same reliable friend, after all that had happened in his life? The hedgehog cleared his throat and called to his friend loudly, in front of his house.

He soon found himself in front of a plump and lively female hedgehog, who examined him from tip to toe with her restless eyes. "You must be the scruffy friend, aren't you?" she questioned him with a very thin, chicken-like voice.

"You know about me, pretty lady!" cried the hedgehog happily.

"Of course I know," said she, and burst into laughter. "What kind of wife would I be, if I didn't know everything that concerns my husband?" The newcomer also smiled, delighted. This welcome was really a pleasant surprise. "He is taking a rest, but he will surely be very happy when he discovers you came to visit him," she rattled on eagerly. "Come on inside!"

"I'd better wait until he gets up..." said the scruffy hedgehog, complaisant. "I don't want to disturb him. For my part, there is absolutely no rush...."

“But stop being so polite!” exclaimed the female hedgehog and started laughing again. “Are you friends or not? Come on in here, before I get tired of asking you so many times.”

The little hedgehog lay with his impressive belly upward, in a moss bed in a corner of the den. Next to him slept two cubs born a couple of days ago, which didn’t even jerk when their mother got in together with the scruffy hedgehog. Their father opened one eye a little and then turned heavily on one side. A few moments later, however, he opened both his eyes wide and jumped to his feet with a sudden snap.

“Scruffy, it’s you!” he cried, and rushed to welcome his friend. The little ones woke up immediately and began to whimper, so their mother went to them quickly. “Leave them alone for a while -- they won’t die -- and quickly give us something to eat, wife!” the head of the family blew up at her, after releasing himself from the embrace. “Don’t you see my friend is starving?”

The scruffy hedgehog interfered, embarrassed. “I had breakfast. Don’t worry about me. You’d better worry about the cubs.”

His friend seemed not to hear him. “Quickly bring us something to eat and then you may do what you want, is that clear?” The female hedgehog left the cubs, which were whining louder and louder, and began to dig near the entrance of the burrow.

“What’s the news, my friend? How is your life?” the little hedgehog warmly asked his guest.

“I’m well now. You know I lost my mother...”

“Yes, I learned that.” The little hedgehog gently patted him on the back. “I was very sorry. She was such a good wife and mother ... so good.” He started gulping the dried fruit that his wife had put between them. “Have some, please; make yourself at home.”

The scruffy hedgehog smiled gently. “By the way, my plan was to see my friends a little and then go back home.”

“I see, I see...” confirmed the little hedgehog while chomping. “And you came first to your good friend, who has missed you so much.... You wanted to see how he’s doing...”

“In fact, I went to the black hedgehog before.”

The other one stopped chomping and looked at him, frowning.

“Only because his den was on my way here, my friend. I didn’t stay long...” the scruffy hedgehog excused himself.

The little hedgehog began eating again. “I think you came to realize that all you did was to waste your time. Anyway, it’s not your fault; you couldn’t know how much he has changed.”

His friend confirmed bitterly, “Indeed, he seemed very changed to me, too. I couldn’t speak with him as in the days of old....”

“Of course you couldn’t. That terrible wife of his fooled him completely. You know, he was the first of us who took a mate and after seeing how he let himself be trampled by that hag, I decided to remain single for the rest of my life. But what’s the use of it? Several weeks later I met this creature with joyful eyes and I, too, had to fall into error....”

The female hedgehog chuckled behind them. “And you’ve lived a very hard life after that, you little one, haven’t you!”

“You see, this is what a wife means! Whether you want it or not, she has to state her point all the time,” said he, slightly irritated. “I think it’s clear to you, my friend, that I haven’t had a hard life, but to achieve that, I had to maintain an iron discipline in this family. Do you understand? In a family both parties have to pull the wagon in the same direction, or everything turns to dust, believe me....”

“Yes, and this direction is always the one you want!” the thin voice from the back added reproachfully.

“That’s normal! You know very well that the more intelligent one has to decide. For the good of both! Isn’t that so, my friend? Am I not right?”

The scruffy hedgehog hesitated for a few moments. “I think that either of you might be right or wrong, at a certain moment, independent of his or her intelligence. Why say beforehand that only one must always decide?”

“You see, you see?” cried the female hedgehog happily. “Finally, a wise hedgehog in this den!”

“You are busy with the cubs! Leave us now; we have important things to discuss!” her husband growled angrily at her, and turned to his guest. “As far as you are concerned, my good old friend, I didn’t expect anything like that from you!”

“Wait a little, my dear...” the scruffy hedgehog hurried to explain. “Don’t get me wrong. I only told you my opinion. I don’t want to be on one side or the other; this is simply what I think about these things.”

“You don’t want to take sides? Humph ... you have a friend here and you don’t want to be on his side? What kind of friend are you if you side with someone else and not with your friend?!”

“Apparently this is a war and I didn’t realize it!” said the scruffy hedgehog, a little chafed, too. “Wake up -- you are speaking about your wife, my friend! Is she ‘someone else,’ whom we must now fight side by side?”

“It’s you telling me this? This is unbelievable ... do you hear me? Unbelievable! You forgot how I stood by you, on your side, every time one or another of your brothers made you suffer? See, there was no question then that they couldn’t be ‘someone else’ to you ... isn’t it so?”

In fact, do you know something? I've cleared it up, finally. The problem is that you've always acted the honest animal in front of your friends, but in reality you've never been able to be honest even to yourself!" cried the little hedgehog, extremely nervous.

That lair had become, indeed, too narrow for the scruffy hedgehog. He felt he had no air anymore and slipped outside, without a word. While he paused in front of the lair, his thoughts were struggling in his head like crazy birds. Who was wrong? Why? Where was the error?... He really couldn't understand anything anymore. All of a sudden he heard a rustle behind him and turned around, shaken by a thrill of hope.

"I'm sorry you had a fight because of me..." the female hedgehog whispered sadly. "You should know, however, he is not as bad as he seems when he gets upset. We would really get along very well if it weren't for my big mouth."

The scruffy hedgehog looked at her through tears, then came closer and gently patted her on her head. "You are a very, very nice wife ... I wish you happiness, from the bottom of my heart."

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That day, the scruffy hedgehog gave up his visit to his strange friend. He felt he didn't have enough strength for another encounter. Back at the home of his elder brother, he told him he wanted to leave the next day in the morning, as early as possible.

"Did you see all your friends?" his brother asked curiously, sounding him out.

"Not all of them. I didn't visit the strange hedgehog ... I felt it wouldn't make any sense."

"Yet he is a special guy, that hedgehog," said the brother thoughtfully. "Of course, he has his quirks, but they didn't prevent him from lending food to almost all the hedgehogs in the neighborhood. I'm sure he sometimes let himself starve to be able to help others, who weren't even his friends...."

The scruffy hedgehog was amazed. It was no problem for him to pay one shorter visit in the morning and then leave straight for home.

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He woke up with difficulty, long after sunrise. He didn't feel very well and once again he thought he shouldn't stay where he was; but rather, he should set out right away on his way back home. But then he would be sorry if he left without doing everything he had wished to do. And yet, what if his meeting with his last friend were to be another disappointment? Even so, the

hedgehog made a sudden decision and a haunted smile slipped across his face. Even when it comes to failure, you don't really fail if you don't fail all the way to the end....

Excited, he headed toward the den of the strange hedgehog, but he didn't take even twenty steps before he ran into him. "You, here?!" the scruffy hedgehog exclaimed, surprised.

"I heard you were going to leave and I thought to say hello.... We haven't met for a long time, and ... you know...." The strange hedgehog seemed unable to find words.

"My friend, I'm extremely happy you looked for me ... I was about to pay you a visit and have a little talk with you," said the scruffy hedgehog enthusiastically.

"I only wanted to see you..." the other said, in the same hesitant tone. "I know what happened in your life, and what happened in mine is really not worth mentioning ... I only wanted to see you once again, my friend. Now go your way, because it gets dark early these days."

"Wait a little!" The scruffy hedgehog raised his voice. "Do you really want to leave now? There is nothing more to be said between us, from your point of view?"

"Even less, had we tried to be short," the strange one said, trying to make a joke. "Farewell! Hurry up lest the night should catch you on your way back home!"

"It will, anyway!" cried the scruffy hedgehog sorrowfully behind him, but he couldn't trigger any reaction from him anymore. The strange hedgehog got farther and farther away, and the scruffy hedgehog felt his heart filled with boiling fury. After so long he was coming to his friends and none of them seemed to care about him, not in the least! The other two at least had families, but this one ... this scoundrel friend of his looked for him only to defy him, or maybe to take revenge because he hadn't visited him the day before! If this were not true, what was so important that he had to do, so that he couldn't speak with him at all? Why was he in such a hurry to leave him? Who knew what embarrassing business he was doing in secret, while in front of the others he acted the nice hedgehog, who didn't hesitate to help any of those who needed support at a certain time?

The hedgehog felt he couldn't do anything else if he didn't solve this mystery. He cautiously picked up the other's trail, who, as far as he could realize now, seemed to be heading toward his den. When arrived in its vicinity, he slipped carefully through the dry leaves, covered with a thin ice crust. Suddenly, he saw him. The strange hedgehog was moving nervously around the den. After several such useless turns, he suddenly stopped near the root of a tree and began hitting his head against it. At the beginning he seemed to tremble and accidentally touch the wood, but step by step, his actions became clearer and stronger. The scruffy hedgehog closed his eyes, but now he seemed to feel the sound of those rhythmic blows straight in his heart. He

couldn't bear it anymore, so he raised himself up from the ground and rushed to his friend. The strength with which he pushed him made the strange hedgehog fall on one side, helpless.

The strange hedgehog stared, eyes wide open, at the scruffy hedgehog, who had slipped away and now recovered quickly to help him. "Why are you here?" he asked hesitantly.

"Did you think it was so easy to get rid of a friend?" babbled the scruffy hedgehog, his eyes full of tears, while he helped the strange hedgehog up from the ground.

The strange one put his head against his chest and said with sorrow, "What's the use of it, my friend? We spend more time together so that we will have more reasons to regret later on?" The other wanted to say something but he didn't have the time, because the strange one went on with a passion his friend would never have expected. "This might be the last time we see each other. What else is there to say? Don't you see? We are both lonely. This is our destiny ... it's not given to us to keep close to anyone!"

"My dear friend..." started the scruffy hedgehog mildly, "...this is nobody's destiny, believe me! But I know you suffered terribly when you lost those whom you loved, and now you are running away from anything that might make you suffer again. But listen to me! You can face any pain related to the loss of somebody dear, rather than the pain of torturing yourself so terribly. I implore you ... don't crush any trace of life in yourself because of fear!"

The strange one was crying softly, like a lost cub.

"I will make my den next to yours. There are many things to do here, and in the place where I came from, there is nobody awaiting me anyway..." added the scruffy hedgehog in a low tone, almost whispering.

"And what will happen to me if you leave me one day?" asked the strange hedgehog through tears. "You say I can face this pain, but I am sure I wouldn't be able..." he replied, shaken by a cold thrill.

"Before dying, my mother said we would all meet on the Other Side..." the scruffy hedgehog suddenly remembered. "I believe this now!" he exclaimed happily. "It cannot be otherwise! Nothing would make sense here, if we couldn't meet there!"

"I don't really believe this, my friend..." replied the strange one grudgingly. "All I see is that we live only here and now, in this world full of pain and death..."

"And full of joy and love and friendship and all the other things without which the life of animals would be impossible! If you see only the darkness around you, it is going to destroy you, my dear!" cried out the scruffy hedgehog very warmly, himself amazed by his unusual inspiration. "Look, I am here! I am moving, speaking ... I am alive! I am glad to be your friend!"

How about you? What are you doing? Are you enjoying the moment now, or getting sad already about what's going to happen tomorrow? For what may ... or may not ... be tomorrow?"

The strange hedgehog remained thoughtful for a while and then, when his friend was expecting it the least, he shook strongly and rose up from the ground. Getting close to the scruffy hedgehog, he picked up, as if by accident, a thin, leafy beech branch, then looked in his eyes for a few moments and smiled shyly.

"You said it wouldn't be bad to build a new den somewhere here, didn't you...?"

THE PIGEONS

“Prepare, little lady pigeon, I’m coming like a beast!” churred the white pigeon eagerly to his motley girlfriend, who looked proud as he was coming to her, for the hundredth time in the last few days. The deserted barn at the forest edge was full of pigeons. For three years since the old lady who protected them had died, and her son had put all his things in a big car which made a terrible noise and had left, the pigeons remained alone there, at the forest’s edge. In the beginning it wasn’t easy at all. Most of them perished of hunger or in the fangs of wild animals, during the first year. Then the two gray pigeon hens appeared.

One of them was very beautiful; the other one would likely have been the same had not an ugly wound in her head given her a repulsive appearance. Nobody knew where they came from, what had happened to their flock, or how they had the crazy courage to visit a flock of twenty foreign pigeons, who had gone wild, to a great extent. But one thing was sure: they knew much better than all of them together the rules of survival in the forest and, if in the first days after they arrived they were treated with contempt and arrogance by all the community, one month later no incursion into the forest was made without one of them as companion.

The pigeons started to bloom, little by little. Next year many chicks were born in the flock and almost all managed to live to a mature age. Now the pigeons were even more numerous than in the days when the gentle old lady dispensed food and warm-hearted words to them. The chicks from the last spring were already mature and were preparing to choose their mates.

The white pigeon was very much in love with the motley hen with joyful eyes and began to neglect his blue brother, whose plans of adventure through the forest glades began to crumble, causing him great grief. They had always been very close, although their natures were totally different. While the white pigeon was always in a good mood, eager to be given attention and ready to make jokes, his brother was thoughtful and shy in his relationships with the other members of their big flock. To the white pigeon, but not only to him, he seemed a creature from another world; withdrawn among his folks, but full of enthusiasm and industry when it came to exploring nature. The blue pigeon owed his survival only to the fact that his brother had always been careful not to leave him alone. For he knew neither fear nor caution when his curiosity pushed him to talk to unknown animals, or to look for the strangest leaves or those stones whose shapes resembled the forest creatures.

He had been this way ever since the white pigeon could remember. Despite much criticism from the elders of the flock, he couldn't change at all and, after many discussions, they all reached the conclusion that there wasn't any chance that he would ever change. This was why, in the first spring of his maturity, no pigeon and no female pigeon thought of him as a serious competitor for the big race of marriage. Not even he thought like that ... at least, not as long as he hoped that his brother would recover from that unexplained distraction which tied him to the proud female pigeon, and would start to accompany him again in his wanderings.

He wouldn't have thought he would miss his brother so much. Even before starting the relationship with the motley female pigeon, those days when the young pigeons began to fight each other most of the time, the blue pigeon couldn't snatch his brother from among the flock. All rational arguments, all praise, and all his pleadings for adventure proved to be useless. His brother had gone crazy, too, like all the other youth, and wasn't interested in anything but fights and the languishing looks of the female pigeons.

"Why do you want to leave me?" the blue pigeon had asked at a certain point, tears in his eyes.

"Why don't you want to understand that I am like them, like all the others ... and not like you? That I could never be happy if I kept living next to you?" answered the other sorrowfully. He then flew away, leaving his brother sadder and lonelier than before.

From that day on, the blue pigeon began to venture alone into the forest. Every time, he struggled to remember the last project that fascinated him, when he made the last trip with his brother. He couldn't do it. Then he tried to remember one of the older projects ... and felt even less. He felt as if somebody had thrown a stone at his head and he couldn't recover at all afterward. The more he thought, the darker it got inside him and the more he lost heart. Nevertheless, he left twice a day and flew automatically to the brook, then to the clump of birches which had been his favorite trees, then to the dens of the rabbits or of other known animals, but he didn't do anything over there and didn't speak with anyone. He got tired quickly and came back to the flock disappointed. He always sat in a place as far as possible from his brother, but every time drew the attention of one or another, who then took care to give notice to the white pigeon. He came quickly and brought the blue pigeon something to eat on each occasion. He knew very well that the needs of the body had not mattered to his brother before, either, and realized that now, when he was so sad and confused, he couldn't be any better. "What did you do this time?" he always asked, trying to seem as happy and natural as possible.

"Nothing special. I went for a walk," answered the other mechanically.

"Something interesting in the forest?" the white pigeon tried to draw him out.

“Of course, of course...” he answered, almost whispering. Then he said nothing more, no matter what his brother asked him, but only moved his head as a sign of understanding and acceptance. He didn’t argue at all. And when his brother finally told him that he had to leave and said goodbye to him, the blue pigeon lowered his head a little and then turned completely on one side, watching closely as if something very important had happened somewhere, at a great distance, in that direction.

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Several weeks later, all the pigeons’ courting rites were over. The flock now had ten new and happy pairs. Nevertheless, a few pigeons remained lonely: two of them were sick, three were old and had lost their lifetime mates; there was the gray female pigeon who had that old wound in the head, because of which no pigeon could get closer to her ever since she had come into the flock -- and, of course ... the blue pigeon.

He was thin; he had rough and dirty feathers and, although he didn’t feel sick, his close friends and relatives didn’t think he would live long. Almost one month had passed since he had stopped going into the forest, and had begun refusing to eat what his brother brought to him. His brother was so worried that he spent a fair amount of time with him every day. At a certain moment he even proposed that they should go into the forest together again, but the blue pigeon, for the first time since his life changed so dramatically, uttered that word totally unexpected to his brother: “No!”

“You mean you don’t want to go together to the forest every once in a while, like before?” he asked, extremely baffled.

“You heard me well. I have no interest in the forest anymore,” answered the blue pigeon, in a determined tone.

“But then, what is it that you are interested in, brother? What do you want to do from now on?” the other said mildly, sounding him out.

“Nothing as yet. I’ll hang around to see what happens. At a certain moment, an idea will come into my head...” he said apathetically, and after a short break, he drew a deep breath and finished, “... and then I’ll let you know, rest assured of that.”

“It’s well, very well that way...” his brother encouraged in a sprightly tone. “But don’t forget you also have to eat something until then,” he added with a jocular voice. The blue pigeon shook his head again, the way he used to do. The other one knew very well what this meant.

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“If you no longer like me, go away and leave me alone!” said the female pigeon in her warm and melodious voice, when her husband landed on the branch she was resting on.

“Don’t you believe it! I won’t leave you, because you are not to be left!” answered the white pigeon, laughing; he came close to her slowly, until he could tenderly touch her head with his. They stayed like that for a while, but then the female pigeon got a little farther away and looked at him seriously.

“Is your brother so important to you as to completely forget about me? Tell me, please ... I want to understand.” The white pigeon was left stunned. “I’m not upset with you, believe me,” she continued mildly. “I just want to understand what is going on.”

“You don’t have brothers; I don’t think you can understand,” he answered, slightly irritated. “Everybody knows that since our parents died, I’ve always taken care of my brother. He is different from us -- this is why he is alone now ... and, unfortunately, he can’t survive alone...”

The female pigeon stiffened briskly and confronted him openly. “I can understand more than you imagine; let this be clear to you! It’s just that it doesn’t seem right to me that you neglect me this way, every day. No other female pigeon is put in such an embarrassing situation by her husband. In fact, do you know how I see these things? He is selfish and freaky, and you are too good a brother, but too weak a husband. And it’s really not my fault that things are this way. You could very well have stayed with him and really sacrificed yourself out of your big brotherly love. But I don’t understand why you have to sacrifice me, too!”

“You see, my dear?” said the pigeon bitterly. “I told you that you couldn’t understand. For me, he doesn’t come before you ... I never meant that. You are the one with whom I want to spend as much time as possible; you are my mate and the future mother of our chicks ... you are the one I love most of all the creatures of this world ... but try to understand me a little! I cannot just mind my own business as if he doesn’t exist. He is here, he is one of us, and his life really matters to me! He is convinced I left him because of you, and all his suffering is born out of this idea. But I haven’t left him in my heart; I just got a little farther from him, as is natural, following the nature of all animals....”

“Indeed, everything is clear when you speak, pigeon ... so clear that it could almost convince me! Except that I remember too well how I feel during all these moments when you leave me alone to be content with what you’ve offered. You must by all means find a solution to this -- I don’t know, maybe a new preoccupation for your brother, a new friend, or maybe -- why not? -- a wife! Exactly, a wife!” cried the female pigeon, delighted. “For the sake of The Great

Spirit! Why didn't I think of this earlier? The gray female pigeon is single; he is single. Wouldn't it be expected that something should happen between them, sometime?"

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The white pigeon looked for his brother the entire morning. "He woke up among the first of us and left for the forest!" several female pigeons assured him. But he wasn't in any of the well-known places in which, until a few weeks ago, the two of them used to venture. And the white pigeon came back, several times, to each of them. He finally decided to go back home, worn out from physical exhaustion and fear.

"May I know why you came back so late?!" asked the female pigeon, angry.

"I couldn't find him, my dear! I couldn't find him anywhere!" said he with his last strength, and lowered his head to her wing, overwhelmed by pain. She jerked herself free and said in a sulky tone: "Right, you couldn't find him -- but the gray female pigeon found him, and quite quickly!"

"What? He is already here? Safe and sound?" cried the pigeon, and all his fatigue went away, completely taken by the wind of hope.

"Yes, as you say ... sound, safe ... and completely crazy! You should know that the gray female pigeon told her sister how she had found him in the grass in front of the fox den, waiting for the fox to come back. Perhaps he wanted to have a long tender talk with her and learn from her the mysteries of The Great Spirit, which he has looked for uselessly throughout the whole forest..."

The pigeon didn't answer her and didn't wait for her to continue. While he was taking off, she yelled stridently behind him, "I was sure you would do this, you fool! Run -- run fast to your mad brother! He always needs you more than I do!"

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In a dark corner of the old barn, the blue pigeon was sitting huddled in a handful of hay, and when his brother got in through the eye of the broken window, he didn't even jerk. His brother looked for him a little, until his eyes got used to the dark, then flew next to him and sat down by his side.

"Forgive me, my brother ... I didn't know I had harmed you so much!" said the white pigeon quickly, but a sharp pain in his heart prevented him from speaking longer. The other one didn't answer, but a few moments later, held out his wing over him.

In the beatific warmth of this embrace, the white pigeon felt for the first time like a younger brother, or rather like a chick near his parent. In fact, who had protected whom all that time they had spent together? And who had taught whom? He had gotten used to believing it was he who had always proven himself more lucid and more responsible ... but now he didn't know what to think anymore. Instead, one thing was now clearer to him than the daylight: just as his brother needed him very much, so, too, he needed his brother. It had always been like that between them and it would never be otherwise.

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Later on, when the two pigeons were still sleeping nestled against each other, the gray female pigeon carefully got in by the window and laid a soft rag in front of them in which she had gathered a handful of millet grain. Nobody could find out where she was coming from with these hidden resources in the moments when one or another needed them most, but she had been doing this ever since she came into the flock. They all knew she couldn't bear to hear anybody speaking about this, so some of the pigeons talked every once in a while, in her absence, about her great goodness, while others blamed her for not disclosing to anyone the hiding place of all those good things, which she was obviously keeping first of all for herself....

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The pigeons woke up later, but both at the same time, as at a secret sign. They looked each other in the eyes and then raised and began to rouse. Suddenly, the blue pigeon started picking at the seeds in front of him, but after a few gulps stopped and looked up at his brother, who was watching him with a glimmer of happiness in his eyes.

“Together!” commanded the blue pigeon happily.

“Together!” answered the other one enthusiastically, and accompanied him for that tasty meal.

When they finished, the blue pigeon spoke again. “Brother, I say we can now go together to drink some water, but then it's time for you to go back home.”

“And you? What's going to happen to you?” asked the white pigeon, worried.

“Nothing worse than what happened to you, my dear...” answered his brother mysteriously. “There is a deeper meaning in what you have done than in what I have done, so far ... except that I was too blind to realize this....”

“Do you want to tell me something and I am too stupid to understand you, brother?” asked the white pigeon, full of hope. The other one smiled at him happily.

“You got it, brother.... Someone saved me and made me see. Now I am going to make a home for myself, too.”

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On the one hand, the gray female pigeon admitted she was flattered by the interest the blue pigeon took in her. Anything she said was wonderful; wherever she wanted to go, the pigeon wanted to go too, more than anything else. However, the female pigeon usually tried to avoid him. She had already learned that whenever they spoke about her in the flock and he was there, nobody else sided with her more vehemently, nor stated grander things about her. She felt terribly embarrassed by this turn of events. The shyest, loneliest and least-understood of pigeons had become the most heated orator of the flock -- for her sake, it seemed. But she didn't need a defender, and even less did she need a flatterer to represent her in front of the group. She didn't ask anything from him and she didn't want to receive anything of this kind. At a certain moment, she tried to speak with him and explain that she was profoundly displeased with these group discussions about her, no matter if they were good or bad. The blue pigeon asked her to forgive him and promised her he would never speak about her again at those small flock meetings.

But of course he couldn't keep his word. If others began to speak about her, he would rouse himself immediately and start to scold them, explaining them that these discussions were very unpleasant to her. Then they began to wonder what she had to hide and why she was acting the modest female pigeon; their observations became increasingly disrespectful until the blue pigeon couldn't resist and started to systematically confront them. His intervention inevitably turned into eulogy, and only after he sat down, tired of his own eloquence, did he realize he had once again said again a lot of things about her.

At a certain point, the white pigeon took him aside a little and whispered in his ear, “You aren't really aware of what you are doing, are you?”

The blue pigeon answered with a bitter groan, “I'm too stupid, brother; I don't know how to do it, I don't know how to get out of this.... The female pigeon doesn't want me, but I can't help thinking of her all the time.”

“Did you speak with her and she refused you, brother?” asked the white pigeon, worried.

“Of course I spoke with her, many times, about many things, but I notice that she has been avoiding me more and more for a while and...” babbled the blue pigeon, befuddled, but the other one interrupted him abruptly.

“About many things, brother?... But, for The Great Spirit, have you ever told her what you feel for her?”

“Not about this -- of course not! How could I have? I think she is not prepared for this and then, what would she think of what I feel, as she keeps avoiding me?!”

“Listen carefully, brother...” the white pigeon said with a sigh of relief. “It’s time for you to tell her everything you feel for her. Don’t give her time to get further from you anymore! Ask her to be your wife and, believe me, even if she refuses you, this will not be her last word. Trust your brother, who has a little more experience than you in this matter regarding the female pigeons!”

The blue pigeon drew closer to his brother and leaned against his wing for a few moments. He couldn’t speak even one more word, but he felt he was loving him more than ever.

“Get out of here, you trifler!” his brother told him in a puckish tone, and pushed him back a little, making him glide down the branch and take flight right away.

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Unfortunately, at the white pigeon’s home things weren’t going well. He had worked at the nest together with the female pigeon, and now that it was ready and he wasn’t absent from home anymore except for rare occasions, he was hoping that things would go better from now on between them. But the female pigeon kept being very discontent. Everything he did, he didn’t manage to do well enough, and what he didn’t manage to do anymore at all was to make her feel loved. This was why she began to meet more and more often with other female pigeons, who had their own family problems of all kinds. The pigeon knew this and, before one of her meetings, he couldn’t refrain and asked her bitterly, “Now you are taking revenge by being the one who leaves, my little female pigeon? It’s better to spend your time with the group of whiners than with your husband, after all?”

The female pigeon turned to him, nervous. “If you haven’t realized this yet, I go there because they really care about me! Do you understand? I simply feel that they care!”

“They surely do!” replied the pigeon ironically. “They care enormously, just like you care enormously about each of them! Every one of you really listens there only to herself. Where another one’s story resembles a little their own, they are full of the most profound understanding! Haven’t you realized so far that I am the only one who really cares?”

“You know something? If the way you treat me means you care...” the female pigeon barked furiously, “then I really don’t care that you care! I’m going to my girlfriends and there’s no way you can stop me!”

“Of course.... Go, and don’t worry about me, honey!” the pigeon shouted behind her, while the female pigeon was flying farther from him, toward the barn, which was the usual place for the meeting. “I have my own friends, who are waiting for me!”

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The blue pigeon bowed his head and was looking attentively at something important in the bush at the root of the tree he rested on.

“What do you want to tell me, pigeon?” the gray female pigeon asked him for the tenth time. From her tone of voice, she seemed already to have lost her patience and the blue pigeon was afraid she would leave and would never want to talk to him again.

“Forgive me, dear little lady pigeon!” he said, in such a low tone that she realized only after a few moments what he had said to her.

“What is it that I should forgive you for? Please, speak so that I can understand you, pigeon!” she said mildly.

“It seems like I can’t tell you ... although I must tell you ... you must know...” he said, feeling stronger.

She encouraged him once again. “What can be so terrible that you cannot tell me? I’m only a female; I assure you nothing bad will happen to you, no matter what the news you are bringing me.”

“Okay, then ... okay. Okay...” he said, and sighed deeply, then suddenly raised his eyes to her. “Well, I would like you to be my wife. I ask you with all my heart. That is all.”

The gray female pigeon was stunned for a few moments, then looked down, too, and told him, almost whispering, “You don’t want this.... It isn’t possible that you really want it. Thank you for your gratitude, but you don’t have to ... it’s too much.” Then she turned around and flew into the forest.

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Late into the night, the female pigeon came back to the flock. She was starving and tired and looked worse than ever. First she wanted to sit in her favorite tree, but she remembered that in the morning that was the place where her meeting with the blue pigeon had taken place, so she turned and sat in another tree, farther away, near the barn. Everybody was asleep and none seemed to have noticed her arrival, but while she was preparing to fall asleep, a short flap made

her jerk. She turned her head and noticed the silhouette of a dark pigeon, who was sitting on a branch behind her.

“Is it you?” she asked, with such a feeble voice that she could hardly hear herself.

“I looked for you till the night fell...” said the blue pigeon, worried. The female pigeon felt a very strong thrill. “You shouldn’t have run into the forest...” he continued with the same determination, totally unusual to him. “If you can’t stand me, it is better that I be the one who leaves the flock. I’m of no use to anyone anyway. But please, I’m asking one more thing from you before I leave.... Don’t put your life in danger because of my or someone else’s stupidity! Nobody deserves to....”

“Why are you torturing me this way, pigeon?!” she interrupted him unexpectedly. “Do you think it has been easy for me to be lonely for such a long time? Do you think it has been easy to accept that I’m so ugly that none will ever want me as his mate?” The pigeon wanted to say something, but she went on right away. “When I finally managed to get used to this and I was happy with my life, you showed up! With your attention, with your care, with your praises and now ... with this proposal! Haven’t you ever looked around? Are you blind? Don’t you know what a female pigeon should look like?!...”

The pigeon was shaking with impatience. He had never wanted so much to speak.

“I know only what I feel and what I want. And if all the female pigeons in the flock were single and they all wanted me, I would still want you. I have no interest in any other female. To me, you are the best and the most beautiful. And if you don’t want me, I am not going to look for another mate anyway. If I cannot be where my heart is, then I had better be alone with my longing. Much better!”

The female pigeon began to cry softly. All the black dreams that had stayed so long on her soul were now rising to the sky, crumbling like a thin veil of mist.

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The coming of the autumn found the pigeon flock in a state of unprecedented agitation. The son of the old lady who had once taken care of the pigeons came back one evening to his mother’s old house. First, the pigeons heard the frightening noise of the car. Those who recognized him were not many, but when the flock learned what was going on, nobody felt very happy. When the man got out of the car, the cheerful bark of a young dog thrilled the air of the forest. The pigeons panicked. The gray female pigeons, the two brothers and some of the old pigeons left on a reconnaissance mission to the old lady’s house. A little later, when they came back to the old barn, they noticed that all the other pigeons had disappeared. They looked for them

and found them quite soon, because they were all gathered in one old oak tree, two hundred steps away from the barn, at the forest's edge.

At dawn, they all sat down in council. After a night of fear, some of the members of the flock decided to leave. Many others were still hesitating. The gray pigeons argued that the man wasn't a danger to the flock. The two brothers had gotten close to his dog and when he began to bark and run after them through the yard, the man got out on the stoop and called him inside. He surely couldn't be a bad man. The elderly of the family confirmed that they had known him before his mother died and, although he had never shown much interest in her pigeons, he had never done any harm to them, no matter how small.

The motley female pigeon was, nevertheless, very frightened. A dog is still a dog and it seemed like this master used to let him free. It was clear that the chicks of the family must not grow up in such a dangerous place. Her husband, the white pigeon, tried to calm her down. "Let us wait at least a couple of days, my dear!" he suggested. "Then we can all decide what is best for our family."

"Even now, when the life of the entire family is at stake, you don't want to do as I wish!" she said reproachfully. "This time, however, you must make up your mind. All my girlfriends and their husbands agree that leaving is the wisest solution...." The female pigeon looked to the group of her four friends and they nodded quickly. One of the husbands tried to say something, but was immediately covered by the simultaneous intervention of more members of the flock. In a few moments, noise and chaos ruled in the council.

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One week later, what was left of the flock had grouped again around the old barn. The gray pigeon, her husband, and his brother began to make new expeditions through the forest. That day, the white pigeon accompanied them only to the brook. He had awakened quite tired, and after this short flight, he decided to go back to the flock. His brother promised him that their excursion would also be shorter this time, but he insisted that they shouldn't worry and spoil their program because of him.

After he had left, the female pigeon turned to her husband and put her little head on his chest. "He is still suffering after his mate, isn't he?"

The pigeon sighed deeply. "He is, but he is waiting for her at the same time. As long as he hopes she will come back, it's still good...."

Suddenly, the eyes of the female pigeon were full of tears. “My dear, I must tell you something ... something very important ... I hope with all my heart you will forgive me, because I couldn’t tell you before....”

The pigeon petted her gently with his wing. “It doesn’t matter. If you can, please tell me now.”

She looked at him with gratitude for one moment, then bowed her head again and began to speak. “My sister has an old friend among the crows near the humans’ village. Three days ago, they met in the forest and the crow told her that near the plain by the village, her relatives discovered two dead pigeons. Shot ... as far as they could tell. My sister’s friend thought they could be from our flock. ‘What did they look like?’ asked my sister, frightened. The crow told her there was a young copper-colored pigeon and a motley one, very beautiful. A female pigeon, in fact....”

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The two came back home in the evening. They were flying so close to each other that, from time to time, they touched wings. Once they arrived at the barn, they began to look for the white pigeon. “He isn’t here!” They heard the cry of a young female pigeon. They turned to her and she added in a very worried tone, “He stayed next to the man’s house for a couple of hours. There were more who went there, but all the others came back to the flock long ago.”

The blue pigeon gave a loud scream and took flight immediately. His wife hurried to follow him, her heart beating with fear. With several wing beats, they were both on the bedraggled fence of the old house which had once belonged to the good old lady. Her first pair of pigeons had grown up in the gray house. This was where the whole flock had started, and the blue pigeon could never have imagined that this was where he would endure the heaviest blow of his life. Almost without breathing, he searched the whole yard with his eyes, looking for his brother. But in the yard there was nothing to attract his attention. On the house’s stoop, instead, he could clearly see the man, sitting in a round chair with a tall back. His eyes were closed and on his lap he was holding a square and very colorful object, on which he was resting his hands. Two steps away from him his dog was sitting – without a leash, of course -- reclining on the ground, with his big snout on his forepaws. Like his master, the dog was also motionless, immersed in a deep sleep. Nevertheless, behind him something unusual seemed to be happening – something like a short and rhythmic motion, almost completely covered by the massive silhouette of the animal.

“Come after me, my dear...” whispered the pigeon cautiously, and moved a couple of steps to the right on the fence. They both sat down, as close to each other as they could get, facing the

house, and looked in front of themselves, stunned. On the ground, a blue little plate full of seeds seemed to lean on one of the hind legs of the dog. A pigeon pecked at it from hunger. He was so white that he seemed to shine compared to that big and black dog next to him.

THE OTTER AND THE MUSKRAT

The muskrat worked grimly at the new den on the riverbank, till late into the night.

None of his friends managed to snatch a word from him. The muskrat had been working like crazy for four days already, stopping only once a day, for a short time, to eat. There had also been three mornings in which he kept waking up on the bank, near the den, amazed and incapable of remembering what had happened late into the night, so that he hadn't been able to get back home.

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It was almost one month since the otter had left to visit some relatives of hers, who lived in an area of the lake quite far downstream from the forest's edge where the muskrat was building his dens. The two of them had been friends since childhood, and they got along so well that when they were grown-ups, they preferred not to have families, just to be able to keep fully enjoying their wonderful friendship. Their dens were only a few steps apart, thanks to the planning of the muskrat, who had built both -- because everything related to building or home improvement belonged to the field in which the muskrat could prove his amazing talent and industry. Ever since he was a cub, his greatest joy was not to play or have fun, but to build, whether it was construction made from the wood of trees, from the river stones and the clay of the banks; or the invisible material of thoughts and feelings. In fact, his soul was the force that kept building ... and this was because he was not looking for a better world than the one he had to live in, but was ceaselessly trying to make this one better. The mark of his success was not, however, his own pleasure, but the happiness that his best friend, the otter, showed to him.

She seemed born to enjoy his ideas and deeds. Even when he added just a few thin branches to one side of his den, or when he drilled a dry log in which she could keep her latest collection of colored stones, or when, in the evening, he told her of his last idea about the fish farm, which was going to provide them an abundant food even in the harshest days of winter, the otter's enthusiasm was so great that the muskrat simply felt he was growing wings. After noticing the last success of her friend, or after listening to him with the greatest attention, winking ceaselessly with her big wet eyes, the otter began to hop with joy, rushed to him, and embraced him fondly; then she frolicked in the grass like a puppy or threw herself into the river and made dozens of incredible tumbles on the water's surface.

The muskrat would have liked to be able to play with the otter in the water, but he knew very well, ever since their friendship began, that this heavy and strong body of his wouldn't allow him to make even one single move in the water like the ones she made. He wasn't a bad swimmer, either, but compared to the otter, who was even faster and more mobile than a fish, he would have seemed to be a log slowly slipping on the water. This was why he had decided, a long time ago, not to accompany her in her aquatic demonstrations. Instead, his greatest pleasure became contemplating these explosions of happiness and vitality of his friend, who made the most formidable acrobatics in the river water, to delight him in her turn. In those wonderful moments, his soul was close to her, he was dancing happily with her, imitating or completing in the most perfect manner each move of her body. The muskrat knew that in fact he remained motionless on the bank, but he also knew, in a yet more profound and more clear way, that it was him too who was with the otter, there, in the water, because otherwise he couldn't feel that way and enjoy every moment with her. When they weren't together this way, he could be attentive, preoccupied, thoughtful, even cheerful ... but never really happy.

And every time she left, the muskrat realized this in a painful way. But she would come back in a couple of days at most, and her first embrace was enough for all the bitterness of the lonely days to melt away, heated by the great joy that filled the muskrat's heart.

*

This time, unfortunately, after more than three weeks since she left, she hadn't come back; the muskrat, however, didn't lose all hope. That evening, while he was working at the new den, which he was hurrying to finish so as to be able to offer it to the otter when they would meet again, an owl surprised him. He heard, at the last moment, the very discreet and well-known rustle of wings, so he didn't have time to get inside the den. He stayed down, stuck to the ground and strangled by fear, only a few steps away from the entrance to the den. Although he was a larger animal than those the owls usually hunted, he had been frightened by the winged predators since childhood, and even now he wasn't very sure that one of them, more courageous, couldn't make a good trophy out of him, to bring to her chicks. But the owl landed quietly on top of the den and addressed him in a seemingly friendly tone.

"I'm not coming to you with ill intent, muskrat! I've seen you working on this new den for several weeks, and I wanted to ask you something. For whom are you endeavoring so much, now that your friend has left?"

"She has left, but I'm sure she will be back soon!" answered the muskrat, caught by an unexpected chill.

“So it is for her, isn’t it?” asked the owl, with the same strange interest. The muskrat nodded shortly and then sighed deeply.

“Oh, I think she isn’t coming back, my friend!” the owl said in a baleful tone. “Unfortunately, I’ve seen her with her new family in the forest beyond the village. There are almost a dozen otters over there, and I think she has already found a mate among them!”

Any trace of fear perished from the muskrat’s soul. He got up to look straight at the owl, and spoke to her with a metallic voice, which even he could not recognize. “How do you know it was she, among a dozen other otters? I have no doubt that you mistook her.”

“I spoke with her, my friend...” chuckled the owl, delighted. “She asked me about you, and then asked me to send you her regards and tell you she is healthy and very happy there.”

*

After the owl had left, fully satisfied with the effect which her short message had on the muskrat, he started to work again, more grimly than ever. It was all his fault ... he hadn’t been good enough for her -- he the ugly one, he the comic, he who dared associate with the most charming animal of the forest, while he was the least charming of all! An endless hatred for all his disabilities covered his soul and left him almost breathless. He felt like lying down, motionless, but in a few moments, the unbearable state which this thoughtless immobility gave him made him jump to his feet again, terribly frightened. It would be better not to stay! It would be better to go someplace ... anywhere, to do something ... anything...! But all he knew was working, building.... So he began to work again.

Three days later he kept working, almost with no interruption. His moves were stiff and slow, like those of a ten-year-old animal, but he had already begun to feel much better. Although he was still awake, a dream which brought him an unspeakable peace flowed through him. He knew it was a dream, but this didn’t bother him in the slightest. In this dream, the otter was playing in a wonderful lake, shining under the warm sun of midday, and he was watching her from the bank, delighted; she then came ashore, frolicked a little in the grass, embraced him, and threw herself again into the water.

Toward evening, the muskrat was so exhausted that he could only pick a couple of leaves from the shore and push them, with great difficulty, near the den. In his dream, the otter got into the water again, and he was looking, surprised, at how her fur, at each elevation to the surface, was spreading fine iridescences, of all colors of the rainbow. At a certain moment, the otter waved to him to come closer, and he had a little hesitation. “Come with me!” called she, with a voice full of joy and hope. The muskrat got into the water with his forepaws, and it seemed to him, for the

first time, as warm as himself; the otter was right to call him, because this water was giving to him, too, a perfect embrace. Content, he began to swim toward his friend. She kept calling him, but her voice seemed to him farther and farther away; the embrace of the river managed to bewitch him.

*

The little bear jumped immediately into the water and carefully drew the muskrat ashore. He was still unconscious, but the bear turned him upside down on the slope of the bank and in a short time the muskrat began to cough and vomit water. The little bear rushed to him and slapped a few good paws on his back. Dizzy, the muskrat raised toward him a pair of swollen red eyes, then uttered with great difficulty: "You, little bear ... you managed to pull me out of the water?"

"It wasn't difficult at all, muskrat. You were already floating on the surface like a dry log," he answered, in a joking tone.

"I was tired ... I think I fell asleep next to the bank and I slipped into the water..." the muskrat said, trying to excuse himself, but the little bear didn't let him continue. "Of course, of course ... this is what happens when you live alone. You know something?... I have a friend in the north, in the very place where the river enters the forest. He is a muskrat like you and, besides, he has remained a widower for almost one year. I think a new friend would do good to both of you. Don't you want to go with me to show you where his den is?"

The muskrat thanked him very politely. The little bear was, for sure, the nicest animal he had ever met. Not only did he save his life, but after having done that, he kept taking care of him. But he wasn't ready to leave his familiar place. Not yet. The bear didn't comment on his decision, but asked him only to allow the bear to sleep that night next to the muskrat's new den. The muskrat accepted with no hesitation and, while his fellow was preparing his bed for the night, he fell asleep right there, on the bank, in the very place where he came back to life. The little bear saw him and mumbled, discontented, then drew him gently into his bed, still unfinished; he sat down on the threshold of the den, across the slope leading to the waterfront, and went to sleep.

*

The next day, after noon, the muskrat finally opened his eyes. He was still feeling tired and confused. He stretched and shook several times, then left for the den with an uncertain walk.

"Hey, muskrat, did you get up?" He heard the merry voice of the little bear from somewhere behind him. "What do you say? Are we leaving, or do you have something better to do today?"

The muskrat realized right away that he didn't have anything to do in that place anymore. Neither today, nor tomorrow; maybe never. He looked at the new den, then at the two older and more familiar dens, at the turning of the stream with its muddy bank on one side and full of little stones on the other. It was a cloudy day and the leaves, slightly blasted by the coming of autumn already, had no shine anymore. The muskrat discovered that all this landscape suddenly seemed strange to him, and incomprehensible. "We are leaving now!" he said abruptly and started running toward the bear, speeding up.

*

One year later, the muskrat already had his own family. First there was his mate, the daughter of the widower muskrat whom the good little bear had introduced to him, then the widower muskrat himself, who had become his best friend in a short time, and finally, the two pretty cubs who were born to their family at the end of the spring. The muskrat could no longer imagine life without them. Whether he worked, or took care to bring something to eat, the little ones were always next to him, fascinated and excited, at the same time, by the knowledge and the many talents of their father. This exaggerated attachment of theirs was, in fact, a frequent subject of discussion between the muskrat and his wife, who saw in these early excursions of the little ones the possibility of some fatal danger. Fortunately, their father and their grandfather had managed to protect them very efficiently so far from all the dangers that lurked on earth or in the air, and the cubs could thus learn a series of very important things, which some animals twice their age hadn't gotten to know yet.

In that evening of early autumn, the father and the cubs stayed, nevertheless, a little too late in the forest. The mother muskrat, worried, sent her father to look for them. He heard the cubs from a distance, because they, despite all their father's warnings, could not abstain from giggling and speaking loudly to each other. "Kids!" he shouted, fearing that they remained alone and without protection. "Kids, come to me quickly!"

"Grandpa! Grandpa is here!" the cubs began to shout, delighted, and they rushed across the glade, looking for him. The old muskrat also ran to welcome them, yelling with all his strength: "Children, wait for me! Stop making sounds! Wait, children!"

But it was too late. A strong flap of wings swept the glade and the cubs' father discovered, terrified, the dark silhouette of an owl that was getting closer, floating above the glade. No other noise could be heard. Unexpectedly, the muskrat sprang from the earth and threw himself before the owl. His courageous jump surprised her quite a lot; she hesitated, and then turned back briskly from her flight, to land on the branch of a tree at the glade's edge. Seeing from a distance the

return of the predator, the grandfather, with a muted whistle, quickly called the two cubs, who were only ten steps away; frightened, they ran quietly to him and, in only a few moments, the three of them were cuddled into each other, under the root of a hollow tree. The muskrat, although he had noticed the maneuver of the grandfather, kept on following the owl, with furious snarling. But when the owl turned her cold eyes toward the muskrat, he suddenly felt all his strength was leaving him. He was now at the base of the tree where she was sitting, and felt how his old fear from childhood began to grow again in his soul. But this time, too, there was a greater strength inside him which opposed fear and overcame it, very fast. For several moments, the two looked at each other defiantly.

“So this is your family, muskrat!” said the owl finally, with contempt. “A courageous, but a rather foolish father, it seems....”

“Then take him, if you can, catchy! This time you have to finish with the father first, to get to the cubs!” shouted the muskrat loudly, and his voice, like his entire body, was vibrating with stress.

“Hey, hey ... let’s not exaggerate, my friend!” said the owl, unexpectedly, but with the same ironic voice. “You really don’t recognize me?” The muskrat had recognized her very well and knew that in fact there was no friendship between them. “You know I have nothing against you!” she continued, with a mocking friendliness. “On the contrary, I want to help you. And now, believe me, all this family of yours is of no use to you. Believe me, all they do is trouble you!”

“What are you saying, infamous creature?!... I had the impression that owls are a bit wiser than other animals. Now I see I was wrong, because as far as you are concerned, even a young mouse is more intelligent than you!” the muskrat yelled furiously. Then he raised his voice even more. “How can you imagine even for one moment that--”

“The otter is back,” the owl calmly interrupted him. “She came back two days ago to the location of your old dens. She is very sad and asks everyone she meets about you.”

*

The mother muskrat was so happy that her family was back home safe and sound, that she didn’t make the slightest reproach against her husband. She called them all to dinner and then tried for more than an hour to put the little ones to sleep, who wouldn’t stop telling each other about their father’s great feats of bravery. The grandfather tried to exchange a few words with the muskrat, but he soon realized that he was too tired to be in a talking mood anymore. What was important was that nobody blamed him for what happened -- and also that nothing bad had

happened, after all. The grandfather patted his friend on the head, then sighed with relief, and went to bed, too.

When the mother muskrat managed to get loose from the two little ones, she also got close to her husband, but he curled up more tightly, making her believe he was asleep. She looked at him a little and, seeing him motionless, got close to him and embraced him gently, then went to bed next to him, content.

The muskrat relaxed immediately but, although he couldn't sleep at all, he didn't open his eyes. He didn't need to see anything outside, since that wonderful dream, which for so long he had thought lost forever, began to flow again inside him, incessantly.

*

The otter seemed happier than ever. The muskrat had finally finished the new den and started again to make the necessary improvements for the future fish farm. Every evening he told her what this farm would look like and where the covered path would be, which would connect it to the otter's new den. He never spoke about his family on the other side of the forest, although he felt many times a bitter need to share with her his remorse and memories, and the longing that still tied him to his family, especially to the two little ones, whom he'd had no news of for days. He was too afraid that if he confessed to her, he would lose his dear otter once again. And then, neither did she tell him anything about her life during that period of time when they had been separated. What good would it do to confuse things?

On one of those warm summer evenings, the otter decided, however, to speak. In fact, she had a mate of her own in the otter family beyond the village.... Her husband knew about this great friendship of hers with the muskrat and agreed to let her visit him and spend a couple of days with him. But it had been more than three weeks since she came here! She was sure that all the family was already very worried about her. There was no question that she must return, but fortunately, this time they could do things differently, so that they didn't need to break up again. She thought through this carefully, and realized that the muskrat could come with her, and build a comfortable den somewhere around the family and could easily make many other friends among the otters. In any case, he would surely be more tranquil and more protected there, than in this forest.

"Protected?!" exclaimed the muskrat desperately, and then burst into tears. He knew very well that it wasn't he who needed protection, but rather those poor cubs of his whom he had left without a word, for three weeks. And his wife who had been so good to him and so caring with their cubs, and her old father, who became his best friend after the otter had left -- they were the ones who needed protection!

“Why didn’t you tell me from the beginning that you would leave again?” he asked the otter, in a discouraged voice. And she began to cry gently.

“I wasn’t sure myself that I would leave, at the beginning...” she whispered, tortured. “When I saw you again, when I met you again in these places of ours, I wasn’t sure at all I would be able to go back.”

“And then, why did you change your mind now?” asked the muskrat, looking blank. “What wrong did I do to you? You want to leave me again....”

“You didn’t do anything wrong; you’ve never done anything wrong to me,” said the otter tenderly. “But here, in this forest, you only have me and I have you and this is all.... But beyond the forest there are many who love me, who rely on me.... Do you understand? I don’t want to upset them this way; I don’t want to hurt them. And then, if you come back with me, it seems to me everybody has something to gain!”

The muskrat kept silent, frowning.

“You don’t want to come with me, do you?” asked the otter with a faltering voice. He didn’t answer. “I implore you, don’t make me choose!” she exclaimed sorrowfully.

“You have already made a choice.” She suddenly heard the unusually cold voice of the muskrat. “You made the right choice ... I am the one who made a mistake, but at least now ... I will try to follow your example!”

The otter opened her mouth to say something, but then shut it again. She could hardly breathe. “You too have a family here?” she asked, barely audible.

“I have a mate of my own, too...” answered the muskrat without looking at her. “And two little cubs ... and a very close friend....”

The otter got close to him and cuddled him gently with her soft little paws. Her embrace was different from all the others that the muskrat could remember. None had been milder, sadder, or more full of love than this one.

*

Once he arrived on the hill beyond which he could see his family’s den, the muskrat looked carefully toward it. In the raw light of dawn, the thin veil of mist let him see only vaguely the silhouettes of those who lay in the grass. The muskrat went down the slope, his heart beating with fear, without making any noise. Only when he showed up from behind the den, the muskrat mother, her father, and one of the cubs noticed him. None of them had the power to say anything, though.

The muskrat went first to the little one and embraced him. “Where is your brother?” he asked eagerly. The cub looked at him motionless, without a word. “Where is your brother?” he asked once more, nervously, feeling a cold wave of fear slipping inside his soul.

The cub raised his eyes toward his mother, and so did the muskrat grandfather. The mother fixed her husband with an icy look and then ran briskly into the den. The grandfather’s eyes were full of tears.

The muskrat suddenly had the sensation that if this scene went on for another couple of seconds, he would explode from pain. With mechanical gestures, he drew himself back behind the den, then lay down, as if he were dead. Now his immobility didn’t scare him; it didn’t make him run away anymore.... He was sure that, finally, nothing could touch him, when he suddenly felt a warm and small body cuddled next to him. He wanted to pick it up and embrace it, but he didn’t have enough strength to do that. But the cub noticed his motion and slipped a little paw around his neck, then leaned his head against the muskrat’s.

“It isn’t your fault, Dad.... He was very sick and The Great Spirit took him from among us, to end his suffering and enjoy him better. We all understood that, but we miss him a lot.... And you should know ... we’ve always missed you. Every day! Every day we’ve prayed that you would come back home safe and sound.” The cub’s thin and feeble voice was trembling with emotion. “Please, Father, don’t ever leave us alone again!”

The muskrat, as if moved by an unexpected electric spark, turned his head toward his cub immediately and looked at him with endless gratitude. “Never, my dear little one! Never!”

THE SQUIRRELS

The squirrel kit sat down depressed in a corner of the den and began talking to himself.

“The great annoying one! I am the great annoying one ... the one who makes everybody upset ... all the time! And I only wanted somebody to understand me! But who will take the trouble to understand me? My brother, who thinks only of having fun? My father, who always has such important preoccupations that he doesn’t even have time to speak with my mother, let alone with us?

“My mother, yes ... I was hoping at least my wonderful mother would be the one to understand me.... But what’s the use? She can’t understand me, either. In fact, I keep being the only one who understands me. They all say I’m crazy because I talk to myself ... but what else should I do? What should I do if I’m the only one who can speak to me?” The kit stopped for a couple of moments, because desperation threatened to suffocate him. Two big tears trickled from his eyes to the end of his little snout. He sighed sadly and began once again.

“My wonderful mother thinks that parents are responsible in front of The Great Spirit for the raising of good kits ... and if they are not worthy and obedient enough, the parents are entitled to use all kinds of punishments to constrain them. So is it through constraint that the parents want to make their kits better?... So if I behave like a good kit only out of fear of a punishment, does this mean I really am good?” The kit sighed once again. “I think the answer is no ... and I also think that my wonderful mother should first make me understand ... not punish me....”

*

The two parents of the squirrel were very upset. For the second time in only a few days, the foolish behavior of their older kit had put his brother’s life into danger. The latter was born with a small defect in one of his hind paws, because of which this paw was thinner and had less strength than the other one. He had always been guarded or helped by one of the members of the family, because he moved with greater difficulty in the tree. If the parents got farther from the den, the older brother had to take care of the weaker kit. He always enjoyed this responsibility, which allowed him to play the part of a mature and wise squirrel toward his brother ... but unfortunately he never managed to fulfill this duty to everyone’s satisfaction. What was important was that Mom and Dad shouldn’t find out about these little problems, which their lack of attention and their great eccentricity made inevitable. Even if the parents noticed at a certain point that the

little one had a new bruise on his nose or that he was limping more severely with the weak leg or that he had cried recently, neither of the kits said a word about what had happened in their absence. They both intuited very well that being fully honest about the mistakes that the older brother allowed each time would have meant the end of all the fun they could have only when they were alone, far from the acerbic control of their parents.

*

Nevertheless, a couple of days ago the father had come back home shortly after he bid farewell to his kits; the mother was absent, for she had gone to gather some fruits in a nut grove nearby. The doubts of the parents were, of course, well-established, but neither of them had thought so far to keep an eye on the little ones, covertly.

This time, after a short time when the kits counseled each other -- or rather, the older kit seemed to teach his brother in detail -- the two jumped into one of the tallest trees in the neighborhood. They quickly went up to the top and began to let themselves go from one branch to another, using, in turn, their forepaws and the hind paws, for every next jump. Since they both jumped very close to each other, the tree moved a little at every new contact, and none of their short landings was very precise.

The father looked at them horror-stricken for a few moments from the den, then jumped to the ground and, in several jumps, he got to the root of the tree where the cubs performed their acrobatic exercise. But he didn't get any farther, because the older cub landed on the grass, two steps away from him. He had already noticed his father and now was trying to hide from him as quickly as possible, behind the trunk of the tree, when his father stopped him with a short peep. A few moments later, the second cub also landed. In the extreme concentration of the descent, he neither saw nor heard his father, so he was extremely enthusiastic and happy. As soon as he put his paws on the ground, he shouted with all his strength: "Quickly, brother ... now! Once again!"

*

In the next two days, the parents went away from their kits only by taking turns. The elder brother submitted to his punishment with resignation, but the other kit was more and more indignant. He had never felt so weak and powerless as he did now. He wasn't even allowed to exchange a couple of words with his brother, without Mom or Dad being present. On the morning of the third day, the younger kit was the first to wake up, and he slipped gently out of the den. His brother, who was sleeping next to him, was the first to feel his absence and, frightened, hurried to go out and look for him. As soon as he drew his head out of the den and looked down, along the

trunk of the tree, he suddenly felt breathless. Right near the root of the tree, stunned and flattened against the trunk, his younger brother was looking helplessly into the eyes of a big bush snake, only a few steps away from him. Without thinking, the squirrel kit let himself run down along the tree. He fell between his brother and the snake, which had already begun to strain toward the kit with its entire body. Not a moment too soon, the elder kit made a giant leap to the right and began to peep strongly, not only to attract the snake's attention, but also his parents', who, by his reckoning, still had time to rescue his brother, who seemed stunned and paralyzed, stuck to the bark of the tree.

The snake began to turn very slowly toward him, when a short cry stopped him abruptly. The father squirrel had grabbed his little one and was now climbing up with incredible speed toward the den, carrying him in his teeth by the scruff of his neck. Taking advantage of this distraction, the mother jumped behind the elder kit and pushed him forcefully toward the nearest tree on her right. He ran to it with short and extremely quick steps and climbed up immediately on the trunk. The snake panted briskly with his head toward the elder kit, but being unable to reach him, he turned back with an amazingly fast undulation to the place where the mother squirrel had landed. But there wasn't anybody there anymore....

*

Needless to say, for this terrible event which had endangered the lives of at least three family members, the elder cub was found guilty again. At first, neither he nor his brother had any comment on their parents' decision to prohibit them from going out of the den, all day. While the parents kept talking in front of the den about the most appropriate punishments which could correct the irresponsible once and for all, his brother was quiet as a mouse, looking in turn to one or to the other, with his most innocent face. The elder kit, in contrast, had curled up in a deeper corner of the den and had begun, again, to talk to himself.

The parents noticed quite quickly what was going on in the den and began to speak about this, in a threatening tone.

"I've told you before; I think this kit isn't quite normal," said the father first, irritated. "At his age, he shouldn't be talking aloud to himself, as if he were still a little baby!"

"It's just another type of rebellion," added the mother, infuriated. "He knows we can hear him and he's doing this on purpose, to keep annoying us. This is his greatest pleasure, isn't it?... I think we must find a punishment to put an end to this stupid habit of his!"

"Maybe we shouldn't give him any lunch..." suggested the father, preoccupied, in a slightly unsure voice. "I know from my mother that this stuff with food always works with kits..."

“Father, we cannot let him go hungry...” the mother protested, worried. “With all his problems, if he doesn’t even eat, he might get sick. I think the best thing we can do is to prolong this punishment by making him stay in the house tomorrow, too. We will tell him that until he stops being insolent, all he can do is waste his time inside.”

The little kit, as usual, had no opinion; with his unusual astuteness, he realized very well that by attracting his parents’ attention toward him he might expose himself, in his turn, to a contingent punishment. So he held his tongue, but deep inside he was surprised once again that none of them thought, under these circumstances, that it would be interesting to get into the den and listen to those things that his brother wanted so much to say to himself.

*

The elder kit received food, but together with the food he also received the assurance that, for his impertinence of speaking to himself, he would spend his next day also in the den, and for each additional mistake he made, the punishment would certainly be prolonged.

This was the parents’ plan. By no accident, however, the elder kit’s own plan was now a completely different one.

During the night, while his parents and his brother slept their deepest sleep, the squirrel kit slipped out of his family’s warm nest. He climbed a little higher in the tree and looked carefully around. He had never taken a walk in the night, but in the bright light of the moon he could see very well the tops and the upper branches of all the trees in that area. He knew where he wanted to get to, so he quickly outlined his route in his mind and then jumped, with a sure move, into the nearest fir.

*

The rat pup was sleeping in one of the narrow cells he had arranged for himself in a deserted mole warren. When the squirrel kit called him softly, he jumped up immediately from his resting place and took a few quick steps along the warren, in the opposite direction from the approaching noise. Only then he stopped for a few moments, completely awakened from the pleasant torpor of sleep, and asked, a little frightened, whispering, “Is it you ... my friend?”

“It’s me, it’s me...” the squirrel kit answered softly. “I hope I didn’t frighten you too much.”

“I’m not frightened, just surprised! What are you doing here, alone, in the middle of the night? This is no time for someone like you to be out for a walk! Are you crazy, or what?”

“I ran away from home, my friend...” the squirrel kit interrupted sadly. “I used to upset my family all the time and they decided to punish me by keeping me locked up in the den. Everything I tried lately to please them did not do any good at all. So I decided to relieve them of an unwanted burden, and I left.”

The rat pup got even closer to his friend and told him in a resigned tone, “These parents ... can you ever expect anything good from parents? Nevertheless, you know ... I was a little envious of you. Compared to mine, I thought yours were wonderful. After all, you didn’t get beaten, you didn’t go hungry; you even got to exchange a few words or play a little with them.... But you see?... Do you see that in fact none of them are different? They all think they are terribly smart, good at everything and, besides that, they think they are always right! From the height of their superiority, of course they can only look at their children as if we are losers! We are never good enough for them ... this is the truth!” he stated in a triumphant tone. After all, this older conclusion of his obsessed him so much that a little while ago, it had completely changed his life.

“I don’t know...” babbled the squirrel kit, confused. “I haven’t thought this way so far.... It is true that parents sometimes get above themselves and many times they act like our masters ... but, you know, they have to educate us somehow. They must teach us how to behave in the forest, with all species of animals, and in the family, with our own kin.”

“How naïf you are, my friend!” said the rat pup disdainfully. “Do you think it isn’t possible to survive in this world without their great sermons? Look at me! I ran away from my family two months ago and I’ve never regretted the decision I made. Do you understand? Not even when I was terribly hungry or when I saw death before my eyes! And now look at me! I say I’m much smarter and stronger than other pups of my age, who are determined to remain with their families at any cost!”

“I think that, at least as far as you are concerned ... you are dead right, my friend...” said the squirrel kit, deeply impressed. “This is precisely why I came to you. It is clear that I can’t stay with my family any longer. Would you mind if I stayed with you for a couple of days, until I decide where to go?”

“Yes, I would mind that terribly -- what do you think?” laughed the rat pup, joking. “Even if I live alone now, I don’t intend to remain this way till the end of my life! You may stay around as long as you wish, but I’m warning you that your parents will get to us quite quickly. And then you will have to either hide from them, or go on your way as quickly as you can.”

*

Early in the morning, the mother squirrel was the first one to wake up, and she noticed immediately that her elder kit was missing. Without waiting at all, she woke up her husband and they sneaked quietly out of the den, to avoid alarming the younger kit. They both looked in the whole tree, then jumped, one after another, into all the neighboring trees. They didn't neglect even the smallest corner in their search. When they finished, in a panic, they began to shout after their kit with sharp peeps. But these peeps had no other effect than that they awakened the younger kit, and he rushed out of the den, frightened. Not able to see his parents, he began to cry. His mother heard him; she came back to the den, worried, and took him in her arms. The father appeared immediately, too; he was nervous and breathed with difficulty.

Seeing the little one clinging to his mother, he calmed down a little and told her, "You stay here with him. I will go look for the other one. He couldn't have gotten too far...."

"I will feed the little one quickly and then I will come, too..." added the mother, hopeless.

"But you know he can't be trusted, either!" her husband protested. "I think he shouldn't be left alone...."

"He will not be alone ... I will take care of that!" said the mother impetuously. "I will speak with one of the youngsters from the owl's school.... For several seeds of ours, many of them would be delighted to keep an eye on him...."

"Oh, for The Great Spirit, why didn't you say so sooner!" exclaimed the father, surprised. "Our kit wouldn't have been punished so badly, and he wouldn't have thought to run away from home!"

"Why didn't you think of it before me?" She turned the question back around on him, irritated.

"I'm not the mother!" yelled the father furiously. "I believe I have enough to think about, without your expecting me to have all the good ideas! Shouldn't caring about her kits be the most important preoccupation of a mother?"

"You mean I'm not a good mother? You mean I haven't done my duty and it is my fault that this happened?!" she exclaimed, terribly angry.

"It isn't your fault, but you should have been a little more careful..." said the father, trying to calm her down.

"More careful about what? Only now you're telling me I should have been more careful?!"

"More careful about what I'm saying, for instance!" he flared up once again. "Had you listened to me, and had you not given him food yesterday, he would have been here now and he

would have asked us from the bottom of his heart to give him something. And he would have done anything for that!”

“Tell me ... have you ever thought that your kit might be different from yourself?” said she, seeming hurt. “That he might not be an animal so much obsessed with food that he would do anything for it, like...”

“Like me, you mean, don’t you?! I’m a bad example for my kits -- this is what you mean, don’t you?!” he yelled, furious.

“Dad, Mom ... please, don’t fight...” interfered the little one who, for the first time in his life, dared to interrupt a conversation between his parents. They both looked down, worried, toward the kit between them, whom they had completely forgotten about. “It isn’t about you two here, but about us: my brother and me ... I think you didn’t find the best moment to accuse each other! And then...” the little kit continued forcefully, while an arrogant sparkle appeared in his eyes “... you will not call anybody to keep an eye on me. I don’t want that! If somebody stays with me till my brother comes back, I will cry and tantrum so much that I will alert the entire forest. And then, you will surely have a harder time finding him.”

The parents looked at each other amazed, then turned threatening toward the kit. The mother was the first to bark at him, “You know what this means, don’t you?!”

“Do you want to see how you feel when...” his father said hurriedly.

“When what? When you punish me, too?” the kit threw at them defiantly, and turned his back on them both.

*

A little before sunset, the mother squirrel came back exhausted to her younger kit.

She had felt, many times, as if she were losing her mind – not so much from the search she had conducted, though it had lasted nearly half a day; nor from the discussions she’d had with the other animals she met; but from her overwhelming care for the fate of each of her kits. “One lost and the other one abandoned!” These words echoed ceaselessly in her mind, but she couldn’t find any solution. However, when she noticed, at a certain moment, that the sun was very close to the horizon, something broke inside her and, despite the pain, her mind cleared up and she decided to go back home.

The little kit was waiting for her quietly, at the very entrance of the den. It was clean inside, and on the thick layer of moss, a considerable bunch of nuts and freshly collected acorns was waiting. The mother squirrel was not hungry, but this unexpected welcome excited her very

much. She warmly embraced the younger kit and while she was still holding him near her heart, a shudder thrilled her suddenly and tears wet her eyes.

“Don’t cry, Mother...” whispered the kit, trying to seem as determined as possible. “You have seen I’m the one you can trust!” The mother squirrel hid her head tenderly in the soft fur of the kit.

“Listen to me, Mother!” the kit began again, and his thin voice became stronger. “No matter what happens, don’t forget I will always wait for you. You don’t need to punish me, because all I want is to be good and make you be proud of me....”

The evening had already begun to fall, mildly, on the forest, while the mother and the kit went back to the den and soon fell asleep, cuddled together.

*

Maybe the father squirrel wouldn’t have stayed away from the den after sunset, but unfortunately for him, by ferreting about a thick rose hip bush at the edge of a glade, he put one of his paws in an old rabbit trap. Although he wasn’t very far from his family’s den, he didn’t dare to call anyone. He couldn’t know who would answer such a nocturnal call and anyway, he didn’t want to put his wife in danger. He didn’t even struggle, because it was very clear to him that he couldn’t free himself by his own power. He stood there motionless and, after a while, grief overwhelmed his soul. His leg was stiff with pain, but now he felt as if not his leg, but his whole chest had been caught in the trap. He wasn’t ready yet to die, and he felt in no way responsible for all that had happened. Why did he have to pay now for the foolhardiness of others?!

These fidgety kits, they were the cause of all his troubles!... Or, rather, their mother, who hadn’t been able to educate them correctly so far! And what would happen to them when they discovered they had been left without a father? His bitter reflections were interrupted by a slight lisp of leaves, a few steps behind. The father squirrel was frozen with fear. But nothing happened for a long time, so that, little by little, he managed to overcome his fear and look back. There were only a few thin branches between him and the penetrating darkness of the glade. It wasn’t fear, but a terrible feeling, which he had never felt before -- a state of loneliness and complete disability that possessed his heart.

When he was a very little kit, he used to pray to The Great Spirit when his parents left him alone. He remembered that when he prayed, he felt almost as protected, as if his parents were around.

His wife still believed that The Great Spirit existed and that he was the protector of all living beings, even of humans. Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to pray a little in these moments,

thought he, hopeless. “Help me! Please, help me!” whispered the father squirrel a couple of times in a row, without being too much convinced, and then waited in a state of great confusion, for a few moments. *Of course he doesn’t answer*, he thought to himself, upset. *Who has ever heard of The Great Spirit answering anybody? Either he doesn’t exist at all, or if he exists, he obviously doesn’t care!*

It was strange, however, that despite all his doubts, he wasn’t feeling so lonely now. A frail hope began to grow again in his soul. “Even if I am a fool and I doubt your existence, don’t leave me, Great Spirit!” he whispered, excited, as if he were addressing for the first time somebody unknown. “Help me get out of here! I must go back to my family ... I must....”

For the first time since he got trapped, the father’s thought ran to the lost kit. What was he doing now? Where was he? If he were still alive, what would await him tomorrow ... him, a poor lonely kit, wandering through the big forest? Several quick tears wet his eyes. He had to rescue his little kit at any cost!

“Great Spirit!” he prayed suddenly, with a real will and confidence. “Let me die here, but save my kit in exchange! Give him guidance to come back home quickly, safe and sound!”

*

The rat pup nervously shook the squirrel kit, who was sleeping deeply in the middle of the warren. “Wake up, friend!... I found a big squirrel caught in a trap of the humans! He is still alive; let’s hurry up!”

The squirrel kit opened his big eyes, amazed, then began to tremble. The other one hadn’t said that it could be somebody from his family, but he had a terrible apprehension that it was one of his parents. He rushed after the rat and, only a few hundred steps away, he discovered the bush into which the rat slipped very carefully, without making any noise. Suddenly, something like an unseen wall prevented him from following the rat. He remained in his place, as if he were caught himself in an unseen trap, without thinking. Unexpectedly, his friend got out of the bush and waved to him. “I think he has lost consciousness, but he is alive.... Come with me. We have to figure out what to do!”

With automatic steps, the squirrel kit got in after him, but when he saw his father, he recovered immediately. He jumped next to him, worried, and caught his head between his little paws.

“Dad -- it’s me, your kit!” he whispered, holding him tenderly. “Don’t give up, Father! My friend and I will take you out of here!”

The squirrel father opened his eyes slowly and said, smiling, "The Great Spirit has given me a beautiful dream before death...."

"It isn't a dream, Father!" cried the kit loudly, and the rat poked him smartly for his imprudence. But the squirrel kit didn't even notice. "We are here to help you get out of the trap, and then...."

The father looked at his kit, bewildered; then at his friend, then at him again. A grimace of pain showed suddenly on his face, but he uttered no word. He seemed to be waiting for something further to be said.

"And then ... to go back home together!" the squirrel kit added quickly.

*

The rat was relieved that the squirrel father hadn't struggled in the trap. Otherwise, he would have managed to break his leg before they arrived. But how could the two of them, with their weak forces, open this horrible object of the humans? He still couldn't figure out. He looked at his friend and noticed that he was just as confused. Maybe if both of their families worked on this, they had a chance. Yes, he was ready even to ask his family to help him, if this could save the life of this foreign animal.... But there was no way this could happen during the night. Maybe if he could find that nice bear who used to help wounded animals, thought the rat, full of hope! For him, there wouldn't be any danger in going out during the night to do whatever he wanted to do. Did anybody know where his den was? He spoke with the two squirrels, but neither of them knew anything about the bear.

*

"Dad -- are you hungry? Can you eat?" the kit asked his father, to break the hopeless atmosphere that threatened to possess everyone. Of course his father was terribly hungry, but he doubted he could eat, because of the pain.

"Should I go get a peanut for you?" insisted the little one, who felt he must do something for his father.

He refused the kit mildly. "Stay with me, my little one ... I feel much better with you next to me."

But the rat pup couldn't find his place anymore. "A stone!" he exclaimed, trembling with excitement. "We need a stone with a thinner edge to open the trap...." Before the other two could

react in some way, he rushed back to the warren. There he was protected, and it was impossible for him not to find a suitable stone.

Much sooner than the squirrel kit had expected, his friend came back. He brought with him two narrow stones, which he flopped near the trap, with a triumphant air. "Now we'll see how much we can do, my friend! Let's try to push the stones, carefully, along your father's leg."

*

A quarter of an hour later, the father squirrel was free. The three of them had worked feverishly. Their artful paws had turned the stones on all sides, before finding the narrowest edge of one of them; then they fixed it carefully in the narrow opening of the trap, along the father squirrel's leg, and, finally, they had pushed it inside with all their strength. Immediately after the prisoner managed to draw out his leg, the youngsters took their paws off the stone, and the flap of the trap slipped on its shiny surface and closed back. They all looked at it for a moment, frightened, but then began to laugh happily and to hug. The rat pup, who was the first to quiet down, remembered the imprudence of making noise, and made a sign to them to keep silent.

"Let's go home, Dad!" whispered the squirrel kit.

"It's very hard for me to walk now, my dear!" answered his parent, a little sad. "Unfortunately, I will have to stay here until tomorrow morning; otherwise, I will attract attention to myself, and besides that, I would put you in great danger."

"That doesn't matter, Dad! If you cannot or don't want to go now, this is enough for me...." The little one embraced him once again, content.

"Then I'll leave you, my friends..." the rat pup interjected. "I don't think you need me anymore, and I'm quite tired. It's time for me to go home.... But it would be good for you not to speak any more till tomorrow morning."

"I will never forget what you did for me, dear pup..." the father squirrel said, whispering, but his voice was full of warmth. "I would be happy to be able to help you also sometime...."

"You'd better stay with us tonight!" the squirrel kit said.

"You must stay!" insisted his father, too. "It is you who drew our attention to the dangers that surround us."

"This is true, but it makes no sense to mess up things..." answered the rat cub, flattered, but even more disturbed by the fact that an adult animal tried to tell him what to do. "I have my own life, you have yours..." he added, trying to adopt an indifferent air. After a brief hesitation, he continued in a lower tone: "Anyway, I must think a little about certain things."

The two squirrels looked at him fondly and then smiled at each other. The rat pup, who didn't want to hear any more pleas, nor the usual farewell words, turned his back and left the rose hip bush in a hurry. But he didn't take more than twenty steps before a big owl, who seemed to have appeared from nowhere, caught him in her claws and disappeared with him into the darkness of the glade.

*

The next morning, the mother squirrel woke up with a heavy heart. Even before opening her eyes, she remembered her loss and, out of her mind with grief, she jumped to her feet and rushed out of the den. Lost! So she had lost them both ... forever! Tears filled her eyes and she leaned with half of her body on the tree trunk because, although she stayed motionless and with all her paws fastened in the branch, she had the sensation that she would fall down.

She stayed like that for a while; then she felt she had recovered a little, and jumped onto a lower branch. At the same time, the younger kit got his little snout out of the den, trembling. "Mom ... why did you leave me?" he whined, discontent.

"I got out a little to look after your dad and brother..." answered the mother with a husky voice, coming back immediately into the den. "I thought maybe they spent the night someplace and now, in the morning, they would come back home together...."

"Mother..." said the kit in a pitiful tone. "I hope you aren't going to leave me, too! They know where we are and if they want, they can come back home any time. But if you leave, too ... I will be left alone and will not be able to survive!"

"Mom, Mom!" Two merry voices were heard nearby at the same time. Only a few trees away, two frail silhouettes moved with small and irregular steps in the grass; they were so close to one another, that in the first moment they seemed to the mother squirrel and to the little kit to be only one creature.

Giving out a short cry, the mother threw herself off the tree and ran, with big jumps, toward the newcomers. The younger kit, who was stunned when he heard the voices, looked after her until she reached his father and his brother, sighed deeply, and went back to the den. For a short while, a strange and strong fight took place inside him. But when his brother called him happily from the root of their tree, the little kit relaxed suddenly and smiled. Only now he realized how much he had missed that voice. In a hurry, he gathered a few peanuts from under the dry moss blanket in the den, and then he went out immediately.

THE BEAR AND THE WOLF

With great ability, the wolf jumped, trying to catch, in two whipping bounces, the gray kitten, who had wandered away from her two brothers. The wolf always enjoyed chasing young domestic cats that were abandoned or lost at the forest's edge. However, unexpectedly, the dry branches on which he had landed broke under him, and he found himself in a round pit as deep as he was tall. He recovered immediately, appreciating his luck, because the pit was not very deep. So he decided to jump out and follow his prey again, who couldn't have gotten too far in just a few moments. But he didn't have time to strain the muscles of his legs before an amazing blow got him down on the ground brutally, like a lifeless log.

The next moment, the bear threw himself upon the wolf, immobilizing him with the mass of his entire bulky body. The wolf felt his body was crushed, bone by bone, by the relentless push. He whined, swallowing air, and peed like a terrified cub. At the edge of his visual field, he dimly perceived the image of the enormous head of the bear, who growled, with all his fangs naked above the wolf's throat. He reckoned instantaneously there was no chance for him anymore ... this would surely be the end.

He was so scared that he couldn't even breathe when, suddenly, he felt a weak swish, close to him. He sighed hopelessly and looked forward, noticing with amazement the delicate shape of the gray kitten, who had probably jumped by herself into the pit and was now purring gently while heading toward him with shy, swinging steps ... or toward the bear, surely toward the bear, the wolf realized, worried. Unfortunately, this didn't seem to help the wolf in any way; on the contrary, the appearance of the imprudent kitten could trigger the bear's impulse to neutralize his enemy, quickly and forever.

Indeed, the snarling of the bear stopped suddenly. The next moment, with incredible rapidity for such a heavy animal, and seemingly without the slightest trace of effort, the bear jumped out of the pit. When the wolf opened his eyes distrustfully, there was no other living creature around. He couldn't believe he had escaped. For a space of time which seemed endless to him, he still waited for the devastating blow of the bear. Finally he got up, dizzy, and very slowly. All his body was trembling frantically, but, miraculously, he didn't feel the slightest pain.

The bear climbed abruptly out of the yawning ravine fifty steps below his den. He was holding the kitten with his left paw, pressed against his rough chest, which didn't prevent him

from climbing with amazing speed. He got to the den and delicately pushed the little one inside; then he turned back, almost letting himself fall on his back down the ravine, and plucked from its edge, from a young oak tree, a second kitten, entirely white.

But where had the little piebald disappeared to? He looked for him agitatedly in the bushes around; he called him with that tame growl to which everybody used to answer.... But the piebald didn't seem to be around anymore.

With the kitten clinging to his thick fur, the bear climbed into an old and lonely beech on a nearby hill, and searched the surroundings. He didn't know if he could see such a small animal, but if a predator were moving within a radius of a few hundred steps, his searching look couldn't have missed the kitten.

But still, nothing. The bear got down carefully for the sake of the kitten he was holding in his arms, although hopelessness made him dizzy and melted all his joints.

He didn't manage to go up any farther up the ravine. He traveled only the known way, and in a short time he got to the lair. In front of it, a new fear went through his brain like a cold knife blade. He got his head inside quickly and strained his eyes. She was there ... the little gray one was there and was sleeping quietly, cuddled in a corner of the bed. He pushed the white kitten gently next to the gray kitten, then sighed and turned around at the den's entrance.

*

The bear was considered crazy by many of the forest animals. Among those who considered him crazy, he thought, were several friends of his whom he had known since he was a cub, as well as his two brothers and his mother. Even his mother despised him. But the small animals trusted him and liked him – when they needed protection and support they almost always looked for him, although most of them then took care of their own business, without visiting him after all. Anyway, it was well known in the forest that the bear took a strange pleasure in protecting helpless animals.

When he had been very little, hadn't been different at all from his brothers – a little happy bear, gluttonous and always playful. He had already begun to learn hunting when, one warm summer morning, he woke up in the middle of the happy whistles and growls of his brothers. Curious, he got his head out of the den and lingered a bit, contemplating the great agitation of the little bears, who had discovered a fresh hill of red bugs less than fifteen steps away from the den. The two seemed determined to crush all the bugs. It even seemed to be a sort of competition between them! The little bear ran enthusiastically toward them, willing to have fun, too. When he got next to his brothers and was preparing to jump after those little creatures, who had already

begun to spread in all directions, his eyes fell on a little bug who was just preparing to climb onto his leg. He seemed smaller than the others, and the bear was surprised by the incredible confidence the bug had in him; he had already climbed onto his paw and stayed quiet, as if nothing else could happen to him there.

“Oh, oh!” the little bear cried suddenly. “A thistle got into my paw!” he complained with an exaggerated lamenting voice, and his two brothers, a little more malicious, began to laugh at him, because in their opinion, he had proved himself to be once again more sensitive even than a baby rabbit. Neither of them got close to him to see what happened, and the little bear had no regrets about that. Immediately after his brothers went back to their favorite play, he began to go back slowly, carefully moving his leg, on which the little bug kept sitting, carefree. He walked like that almost forty steps to a place where the bushes had grown so tall and thick that even a big bear like his mother could hide between them.

There he stopped, after being very sure that neither of his brothers looked after him, and gently pushed the little bug onto one of the leaves at the base of the bushes. “Beware the bears and the birds, you little one,” said the bear to his protégé, very seriously. He looked at him with concentration, trying hard to remember something important. “This forest is full of dangers for a cub like you, without any experience!” he added at last, relieved, exactly quoting his mother’s words.

*

One month later, the little bear discovered, two steps away from their den, a pigeon chick fallen from its nest. Fortunately, his two brothers were playing, again, just the two of them, at a distance of about ten trees from the lair, and their mother was still dozing inside. Feverishly, the little bear threw himself toward the pigeon, caught him in his palms with great care and, pressing him gently to his chest, climbed with him into the nearest young tree. Then he hurried back to the lair and pretended to be asleep.

That day, they all went to fish in the river, and when they came back home, at noon, the two brothers ran forward to the den, competing with each other. The little bear remained next to his mother, but she was discontented with the fact that he was not participating in his brothers’ play. “Go after them!” she advised him, without hiding her disappointment. “You always let someone else be ahead of you!”

“I’m a little tired, Mom,” said the bear calmly, “and besides ... I prefer to talk with you, rather than playing with them ... you know that!” Therefore, they continued on their way together, and when they got close to the den, the mother noticed that the two little bears were engaged in a

wrestling match, which seemed to have become more than simple cub play. Both of them were growling, and they displayed their threatening fangs. “Stop it, or I’ll show you both what happens to the brawlers in this family!” growled the mother, terribly upset. The two separated with difficulty and the little bear, who was curiously watching them, clinging close to his mother’s body, could see a little shape slightly trembling under his elder brother’s paw. They had caught the pigeon! The mother had seen the pigeon too, so now what followed was the fraternal division of the prey. In a flash, the little bear realized that it was too late for his little friend, even if he could miraculously snatch him from the clutches of his family.

“I’m very thirsty, Mom. Let me go quickly to the brook,” he begged. “It is so close that if I cry out, you will surely hear me!”

“How strange you are...” commented the mother, confused. “We have just come back from the river, and you are thirsty? Anyway, go now, but don’t go again to the river or to any other place than the brook, for I’ll get very upset!”

“Mom, you know I’m a serious bear!” declared the little one in a slightly irritated tone, pretending to be hurt by his mother’s assumptions.

“It’s true you have kept your word ... as opposed to your brothers!” said the mother thoughtfully. “Go then, and come back as soon as possible!”

The little bear turned back quickly on his heels and rushed to the path that led to the brook.

“Do you want us to keep a little of your brothers’ prey for you?” the mother called toward his retreating back.

“I have eaten enough today. Let them share my part between them!” shouted the bear loudly, turning his head toward her once again. He didn’t care that his eyes were full of tears, because from that distance, none of the members of his family could realize that anymore.

*

After what happened to the pigeon, the little bear began to avoid eating meat. He would eat only fish, and since his mother and his brothers began to despise him even more for these unheard-of quirks of his, he became in a short time an unsurpassed fisher. He had such great speed that only rarely could a fish escape his agile paw. With a short and very strong movement, he would throw it on the shore; then he ran after it, caught it again, and struck its head sharply on the shore stones. He knew that even a fish suffered before it died, and didn’t want to prolong its agony for even one moment. Of course, he didn’t take any pleasure in fishing, but he realized very well that were he to give up fishing, too, he wouldn’t survive. Besides, he always used to fish for his mother and for his brothers, too, and not only because he really cared about them and wanted

to make them happy, but also because he realized that these fish he provided replaced many other innocent animals of the forest, which his family would hunt mercilessly if they were hungry.

But unfortunately, he couldn't inspire the affection of his family even in this way. His brothers disdained him because he was much thinner than the rest of the bears, he slept very little, and in the time he gained by being awake he looked for berries and edible roots. He never played with them and they were convinced that this happened because it would have been too dangerous for him to take part in their scuffles full of force.

If his brothers despised him, his mother, in exchange, was afraid for him ... and was afraid *of* him, to the same extent. For the other two, the little bear was still rather mysterious personage, whom they didn't manage to completely understand with their practical minds, but the mother had realized the secret obsession of her youngest cub. She had noticed several times, while she pretended to be asleep, how the little bear carried away from their lair all the little animals imprudent enough to come nearby. She had seen very clearly that every time when she or her other two cubs caught something, the little bear found something to do someplace else. It would have been of no use for her to keep reminding him that life in the forest is sad and rough enough, so that any complication of it made no sense whatsoever. The little bear continued to behave as if somebody much stronger and important than she dictated to him that he must oppose his family's habits.

Finally, the mother was able to understand that this cub of hers was neither strange, nor mysterious, but simply different. He was so different from them all, that his way of being was a terrible threat to the entire lifestyle of his family. And this happened because, from his point of view, any flea-bitten animal of the forest was just as important as the members of his family -- maybe even more important than they! Even his own life seemed not to matter much to him, for he was willing to risk it with no hesitation, for the sake of some inferior creature. The mother realized that if her other two cubs thought about the little bear as she thought, their disdain would immediately turn into hatred and then they wouldn't hesitate to challenge him to fight and kill him. This was why, although he had always been the frailest of her three cubs, she decided to chase him away from the family as soon as possible.

*

The little bear accepted his mother's decision with no argument. He had already thought many times about leaving his home, although he was still very attached to his family. But he saw very clearly that his place was not in his family. In a way, he wanted to be like them, because it seemed to him that their days were bright and their cares were few. What could there be to trouble

them, when their souls didn't feel mercy and pain for someone else's suffering? He, by contrast, suffered for the others every day, and as he grew in experience and knowledge, he realized he would never live in peace. But this was his fate, the little bear said to himself, resigned. He had seen that if he tried to be like the other bears, he felt terrible afterward, so he decided not to torture himself anymore.

*

Unexpectedly, however, a short time after he separated from his family, this profound sadness of the little bear began to give place to some new, hopeful feelings. Now he was totally free to help or even save small animals who came in his way, and some of them became his friends and looked for him every once in a while to speak with him or to ask for his help for one of the members of their family.

More than any attention given to him, the fact that he could be so useful to his friends filled his heart with great joy. At that time, the most important event in his life was his friendship with a fawn whose mother had died, killed by an unmerciful sickness. The fawn had stayed for a whole day next to her mother's body, until a young wolf, attracted by the smell, managed to discover them. Hoping to wake up her poor mother finally now, the fawn began to push her with her snout and to cry sharply, but all that his hopeless effort could accomplish was to incite the predator even more. The wolf fastened on the fawn with greedy eyes and strained, preparing to jump.

But the little bear had been behind the fawn and her dead mother, from the first cries of the fawn. In fact, he had looked out for the little deer for a couple of hours, because he understood what had happened and decided to take her under his protection. He hadn't done anything yet, only because he was afraid that at his first attempt to approach, the fawn would have run frightened into the forest. And had this happened, sooner or later the end would have been sure.... But now the little bear had no time to waste. He began to growl furiously, which made the wolf turn to him immediately, surprised. His hair stood up on the ridge of his back, and one could see from his confused look that the little bear had really succeeded in frightening him. Taking advantage of the wolf's hesitation, the little bear began to walk in a circle, with determined steps, growling and showing his fangs. When he got between the wolf and the body of the dead deer, he drew back with slow but determined moves. The wolf was also getting closer, step by step, because the grimness of the bear cub made him still unsure of his power. Everybody knew that bears, even the youngest ones, were terribly furious if an animal dared to hurt them. They behaved

like crazy animals then and, if the enemy were not wise enough to run, it would be very hard for him to escape with only a few minor scratches.

So, the wolf became suddenly very prudent, and the little bear, feeling his moment of fear, whispered to the fawn, “Come with me, little one! You can do nothing anymore for your mother!” The fawn felt from his voice that she could trust the bear. If she were to run away, the wolf could surely catch her, and this nice bear couldn’t keep the pace to defend her.

In one bounce, the fawn was next to the bear, and the wolf, goaded, jumped too, getting only a few steps away from them. For several moments they looked into each other’s eyes, without moving; then the bear began to draw back slowly, growling ceaselessly. The fawn, staying close to the bear, followed his every step. The wolf was also growling, more and more irritated, but it was clear to his enemy now that this was only the furious protest of the defeated one. The predator would have to be satisfied with the deer’s lifeless body.

*

The bear and the fawn stayed together until the latter, having become an adult, decided to leave in search of a mate. The bear had also grown up a lot and had gotten fat; now he was so bulky that none of his kind who lived in this forest, including his two brothers, would dare to challenge him to a fight. But they all knew his favorite preoccupations, and this was why not only were they not afraid of him, but they didn’t miss any opportunity to make fun of him, calling him “the mad one of the forest.”

But the opprobrium of his kind was never so strong as when they found out that the bear had decided to adopt six kittens which he discovered one chilly spring morning, abandoned in a wicker basket at the forest’s edge....

*

For five weeks, the bear managed to feed and defend all his little protégés very well. His older friends were a little jealous of the newcomers, who had succeeded in hogging their good bear almost completely. Only once a day, when he went fishing, was he far from the kittens, but not before moving them all into a cleft under a narrow and long cliff, only a few steps away from his lair. None of the forest’s hunters could reach such a narrow space to attack them, except the quick marten, but he had a lot of respect for the bear since he had rescued one of the marten’s cubs, who had fallen from a branch into the big water. He wouldn’t have done anything to upset the bear, even if this meant that he and his entire family would go hungry.

Consequently, the shelter in the cliff was as safe a place as possible for the kittens. After moving all of them in there, the bear lingered a while in the vicinity, to make sure that the little ones were quiet. If they were up to playing and exploring, the bear postponed leaving, and supervised their mischief patiently, until they got tired; then he took every one of them and put them back in the cleft.

After another short wait, when he was convinced that the kittens were asleep, the bear would rush toward the river. But he didn't always make it to the fishing place in the shortest time possible. Sometimes, one of his older friends happened to come his way, who would stop the bear to talk to him a little, usually to complain about an enemy, or even about one of his family members. The bear always listened patiently, and it took him only a couple of jokes to make even the most upset of his friends happy. He was always invited to pay a visit to the family, and he promised to do so as soon as possible. Then he excused himself for his haste and left, almost running, toward the river.

*

On this day, several young birds from the owl's school, who knew him very well, saw him running on the path.

"The mad one, the mad one! Get the mad one down!" they cried enthusiastically, passing over the bear in frequent raids and throwing little stones, branches, acorns, and even pine cones at him. The four friends never did this when he was with the kittens, because they were afraid that the bear would get angry if their exaggerated jokes harmed the little ones in some way. When they managed to catch him alone, they almost always subjected him to such an air attack, whose effect was always the same.

The bear, pretending to be badly injured, shook strongly at every touch and fell over on his side. After he got the last blow, the "mortal" one, he flopped down in a silly position, with his head dug into the earth between his forepaws, and with his huge back raised to the sky like a round hill. The next minute, the birds rushed all over him and tickled him on his joints with their beaks and claws, so that very soon the trickster, not being able to endure any more, began to laugh and turned happily on his back, and the birds enjoyed hopping freely on his belly and chest.

This time, to the great joy of the birds, their play lasted quite a long time. When the bear finally managed to escape their playful teasing and rose heavily from the ground, intending to continue on his way, a strange feeling of fear seized him. He rushed back to the den and the birds, worried by his unexpected reaction, flew all the way with him.

Fortunately, the little ones were all asleep in their hiding place, so the bear smiled, relieved, at his friends, and slapped himself briskly on the head with his paw. How stupid he was, to be scared by nothing! He drew back from the hiding place, and when he was at a distance of about twenty steps, he made a sign to the birds to come closer quietly.

“Stay here a little with the kittens, my dears!” he requested shyly. “I must go fishing and I’m afraid I have waited too long, and that before I come back, they will wake up and start to frolic out of the hiding place...”

“Don’t worry, friend!” assured the fieldfare, who was the boss of the young birds’ group. “If they wake up and get out, we’ll let you know right away!”

*

The bear didn’t have time to catch but a small fish, when a terrible noise coming from the shore attracted his attention. All four of his winged friends were shouting at him, each one in his own tone of voice, so that the bear thought that not even the most attentive ear could discern a message in that meaningless noise. First he felt like laughing, but a moment later felt he was freezing. With a great effort he managed to concentrate, and then shouted loudly and hoarsely to the four: “Shut up! Shut up!” They all lost their voices, as if an unseen spell froze them all of a sudden. “Now tell me, fieldfare ... what happened?”

“The little ones...” babbled the fieldfare, “the little ones got out, and we told them they must stay there quietly and wait for you ... but I think our voices scared them. You didn’t tell us they are so fearful...”

“Where are they?” asked the bear with a bleak voice.

“We don’t know anymore...” stuttered the fieldfare, lost. “After they got out and we descended to the ground to try to talk to them, they ran away!”

*

The bear dropped to the ground instantaneously and carefully examined the kittens’ hiding place. Indeed, there was nobody in there anymore. He took a deep breath and stretched the muscles of his back. He felt he was losing his mind, but tried very hard to control himself. The lair! First of all, the lair! He rushed inside, and even before he could see, a slight trembling attracted his attention. There was something there! His eyes got used to the darkness, and he discerned clearly that four of the kittens were there. He gently patted their heads to calm them down, and the little ones immediately began to scratch themselves on his rough paw and to purr happily. “The others!” a scared voice resounded quickly in the bear’s mind. He must look for the

others as soon as possible! He drew himself out of the lair, going back cautiously. The gray kitten, his favorite, followed him and tried to get out of the lair, but the bear growled at her angrily, showing his fangs. The kitten hesitated for one moment, then ran inside, scared. Never, since he had adopted them, had the bear been so harsh to his little ones. Not even he himself would have believed he could be so cruel ... so cruel that it seemed to him that not he, but someone else, a stranger, moved him from the inside in those moments.... He quickly took from the front of the lair the fish he had brought from the river, and threw it inside. He didn't linger, but ran to look for the two lost kittens.

*

The news about the loss of the kittens spread out rapidly among the bear's friends. Unfortunately, however, as always happens in such situations, the news did not get only to those who might have helped.

The young wolf was among the first who learned it ... and he was considered by the forest animals the worst possible predator -- after the men with guns, of course. He had gotten lost from his pack when he was little, and he had to survive, hunting by himself. Few young wolves managed to survive by themselves, but he did. He was not interested at all in what other animals might think; he had no time for that. He was interested only in what might be eaten ... and what he knew for sure was that the forest hid innumerable creatures that could be eaten. He already knew the taste of all kinds of beings that populated the forest, having killed all that could be killed and having taken his share from many bodies that sickness, nature, or other predators had gotten down.

But the secret of his endless greed, which pushed him always to hunt, was not hunger, but hate.... The wolf had a terrible hatred of all small or big animals who could easily find food, without being forced to run exhaustingly and use their muscles, their teeth and claws, to kill. And more than any of these animals, he hated the bears, because they were not afraid of him and could always defeat him in an honest fight. And more than all the bears, he hated one big and strange bear nicknamed "the mad one," who, when he was still a cub, had managed to humiliate him, making him lose a fawn which he had run down next to the lifeless body of its mother.

So these wretched kittens were the protégés of the mad one... and now they were surely hiding somewhere, not far from the mad bear's lair. Why shouldn't he try his luck?

*

All the bear's friends were sure that the two lost kittens were dead, without a doubt, and had been so for a long time. But to the bear, they were still in the forest, but they were very scared and hiding most of the time; maybe they had gone wild, and this was why they had given up trying to come back home. After several weeks of searching, the bear had only one fear: the summer was coming to its end, and if he didn't find the little ones fast, the wet and cold weather which would follow could be fatal to them.

In that period of great agitation, a new worry appeared unexpectedly in the bear's life. One of the kittens who remained with him, a very playful and spoiled orange kitten, got very sick and refused to eat. The bear made a soft bed of leaves and moss for him in a corner of the den, and the kitten sat there by himself. He slept almost all the time, and when he woke up, he mewed weakly to his adoptive parent, who rushed immediately to comfort him, to cuddle him and try to feed him with fish he had patiently chewed into a gruel.

Three days after he had moved into that comfortable bed, the kitten died quietly, but none of his brothers realized it, and the bear had gone to the river to fish.

*

In the bear's soul the burning of this new loss had not been extinguished yet, when two nice hedgehogs, new friends of his, paid him a visit to warn him that the young wolf was beating about his den more and more often. After the meeting with the hedgehogs, one afternoon the bear dug three big pits in the soft clay, mixed with brittle stones, which covered the abrupt slope of the hill, several yards away from the den and the kittens' hiding place. Then he covered the pits with many dry branches and leaves, and spent the evening talking to the kittens and making all kinds of plans in case the wolf managed to catch them alone. Now they were big enough to be able to climb easily into the trees by themselves; if the wolf were to follow them, there was a good chance that the wolf would fall into one of the traps. As soon as they found shelter, the little ones were instructed to meow as loudly as they could, and the bear, who was going to hear them, would appear immediately and punish the wolf so harshly that he would never have the courage to get close to one of his protégés again. And this time, when he was thinking of protégés, the bear wasn't thinking only of the little ones he had now, but of all the the helpless creatures which The Great Spirit had ever sent his way.

*

After confronting the wolf, the bear rested a little at the den's entrance and then left again to look for the piebald kitten. He came back only in the evening to bring some fish for the two

little ones, who hadn't left of the lair again, being very scared. Then he left again, hoping that, in the silence of the night, his strong growls would be heard through the entire forest. The cats had wonderful senses that helped them to get oriented in the darkness, and the bear had no doubt that the lost kitten could manage to get to him. While he was groping and nosing in the dark, his growls woke up everybody who was asleep in the forest; several of his friends, who had more courage, came after him and tried to encourage him. But unfortunately, none of them found out anything about the lost kitten. A shadow of dismay began to fall slowly over the bear's heart. He had to pass by home briefly to see if the two little ones whom he had left in the den were sleeping quietly. Nobody knew what would happen to them in the long run, but one thing was clear now: all the worst might happen to them if he weren't permanently around! When he got to the den, a tall and slim silhouette attracted his attention between the trees behind it.

"Bear!" he heard a known voice whisper to him.

"My deer!" said the bear, and a pleasant warmth invaded his soul. So she had come, too, to see him. She wanted to help him, of course.

"I know what happened..." she whispered in a strange tone. "My dear, my good one ... I went to the brook with my girlfriends to drink some water, and I saw your kitten."

The bear felt his heart beating like crazy. "Where did you see him, my deer? Don't make me wait, I implore you..."

"He is ... next to that curbed oak near the big turn of the brook," she said, and in her voice he could feel the same unusual hesitation. She seemed as if she didn't want to tell him, or as if she were sorry that she had told him.

But the bear was too happy to pay attention to details. He turned suddenly on his heels and started to run faster than if he were running for his own life.

"My good bear..." said the soft voice of the deer behind him, but the bear couldn't hear her anymore.

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The piebald kitten lay quietly on his side, at the root of the gnarled oak which rose only two steps away from the brook's shore, where the brook became wider at one turn and its fast waters began to calm.

The bear got close to him gently, not to scare him, growling gently. The kitten seemed to be sound asleep, for he didn't make the slightest gesture to show that he heard him. "My little one is very, very tired!" thought the bear and, stretching toward the kitten, felt a strange, livid, wet smell coming from him. "He got wet, of course -- imprudent as always..." he said to himself,

worried. He touched the kitten gently with his paw to wake him up, but the little one didn't even move. The bear pushed him then a little harder from the back, lifting him up from the ground. When he let him fall, the kitten's body fell down, inert. Overcome by a horrible foreboding, the bear, trembling, put his big head down to that patch of wet fur and touched it a little with his nose.

This simple touch shocked him, suddenly, to the depth of his being. He jumped two steps back, without breathing, and looked, terrified, at the motionless body of the little one. The night had gotten into his soul, and now he was feeling choked by pain. Nevertheless, he suddenly heard a mysterious voice in his tortured soul and, with a great effort, the bear managed to understand it. Had he remained there any longer, he would surely have gone crazy!

Hardly taking his eyes off that little dark shape, which was still so dear to him, the bear turned back slowly and hobbled toward his home. He got into the lair and cuddled with his back against the two kittens, who clung to him happily. He, in exchange, felt his bones frozen, and their touch, which had been until now the most pleasant thing on earth, didn't give him any pleasure at all. He felt only mercy for them, for these frail kittens that were still next to him ... how could he protect them better?! How could he guard them better than all the rest of the lost ones, for whom he hadn't managed to be a good father?

In a few moments, his heart was filled with sorrow for all the wounds and tortures and possible deaths of those innocent beings. Once again, the darkness made him dizzy and unable to breathe except with enormous difficulty. His kittens were incapable of surviving without help in this wild forest, and he, in his turn, was so lonely ... so foolish and misunderstood and lonely!

*

When it became clear, from the cold air of the evenings and mornings, that autumn had come, a man appeared in the forest, carrying a gun and accompanied by a child. They walked on the shadowy paths, talking and bending down from time to time, to search certain traces. The forest was unusually silent, because the news of this visit had spread very rapidly among the animals and, of course, nobody could expect anything good from this. Most of them were hiding in their dens or nests, overcome by great fear. The bear was among the few who weren't very afraid of these incursions of the humans, because as far as he knew from his mother and from what he had lived himself until then, bears had never been hunted in the forest. But this didn't mean that he was not terribly worried, because he realized very well that many of his friends could become the victims of the humans' unmerciful bullets. When it came to defending a friend, the only place where "the mad one of the forest" wouldn't get was in front of the hunter. The

human beings inspired him a strange feeling of respect and, no matter how sorry he was afterward, he never felt enough power inside him for a confrontation.

This time, the bear was at a distance of thirty steps from his den, behind some peanut bushes, together with the gray kitten, who was so spoiled that she seemed to have no greater desire than to cuddle endlessly in the arms of her good parent. Her white brother, more playful by nature and more independent, found something to do on the lower branches of an old beech in the vicinity of the den. The bear, who was rising on his hind paws from time to time and looking through the peanut branches, noticed that the two humans had deviated from the path and were heading across the glade, precisely toward his den. Fearing that the little white kitten was too much exposed in the tree near the den, the bear began to call him with a very low growl, which he was sure that the weak ears of the humans could not catch. Surprisingly, however, while he was trying to attract the kitten's attention, from the smaller human who was accompanying the hunter, he could hear a strange, long sound, which he had never heard before, and which seemed to resemble, in its turn, a call. The gray kitten next to him became suddenly careful, and the bear took her quickly in his arms, fearing that she would get scared and run away. Then he turned his eyes toward the kitten in the tree and noticed, satisfied, that he was preparing to come down. He turned back and thought that if the kitten got to them quickly, even if the humans came directly to the peanut bushes, they still had time enough to run through the ravine and then hide in the wild brush at the base of the hill. The unskillful human beings surely wouldn't dare to follow in their footsteps!

The bear smiled, satisfied, and turned his eyes to the lair. That whistling sound of the human child had stopped. However, the little white kitten hadn't appeared yet. Worried, the bear rose again to his feet and bent forward through the branches. He looked first at the tree from which the kitten had descended and then, only a few steps away from it, at the hunter, who had stopped and was looking carefully at his son. The boy was standing with his back toward the bear and seemed to hold something in his arms. The bear began suddenly to shake strongly, and unconsciously pressed the little gray kitten to his chest harder. The kitten whined a little, but the bear was too terrified to notice. The child had lifted his hands to his father and the bear could clearly see that the "object" offered to the hunter was his white kitten! It was motionless, maybe hurt – or perhaps it was only paralyzed by fear, thought the bear, maddened. Had the gray kitten not been next to him, he wouldn't have hesitated for one moment to jump before the humans and try to scare them, to rescue his poor kitten But now! The humans kept speaking to each other and the child had taken the kitten in his arms again. How sorry the bear was that, like all the creatures of the forest, he couldn't discern even one word of the complicated language of humans!

However, unexpectedly, the talk of the two stopped, and they turned and went on their way back, on the same way which had unfortunately brought them to the tree where the white kitten had been. Then the bear knew immediately what he had to do! He took his little gray kitten and carried her carefully to the lair; then he left her there and asked her not to get out for anything in the world until she heard some word from him. The humans weren't more than one hundred steps ahead of him, when the bear began to do what no grown animal of sound mind had ever done, since the first man with a gun stepped into this forest ... he followed them.

After a quarter of an hour of walking, the humans got to the path, and the bear decided with no hesitation to follow the same way, although this was very risky for him. But only this way could he catch them quickly and, almost without making any noise, surprise them. There were only thirty steps between them, when the bear noticed that his little kitten had climbed onto the human child's shoulder and was looking at him. He made a sign to him with his paw, and the kitten watched him attentively. No doubt he was seeing him, but still ... why wasn't he running toward him? The kitten was totally free ... the little human wasn't holding him and didn't seem to be paying much attention to him. With a couple of jumps, he could be in the arms of his father bear. But of course ... the bear realized in a flash ... this would attract the attention of his abductors! But his little intelligent kitten didn't even meow, fearing she would draw attention to him!

The bear took a few more steps, following the humans; then he stopped a little and hid away, with large gestures, behind a big bush at the path's edge. From there, he stretched his neck carefully and looked at the path. The humans were going on, composed, but the kitten couldn't be seen anywhere. The bear's eyes eagerly searched the surroundings, then came back to the path, to the humans and.... No, this could not be true! On the child's shoulder, his white kitten could be seen, even now, like a small shining stain. So he hadn't left to come back to his father! The bear got out on the path again and made a few more quick but unsure steps, before stopping.

The two humans didn't want to do anything bad to his kitten, he was now sure of that. And if the little one had chosen them as his protectors, he had no right to go against that decision. His eyes were full of tears. He had been too bad a parent to the other kittens to claim any right anymore as far as this one was concerned! And anyway, a nice human was always a better protector than the most careful of animals. It must be so, since the humans always knew better than the animals what to do in order to be the strongest....

*

The wolf had gotten out of the path, and ran through the trees like crazy. They had seen him already! The hunters had seen him, and several bullets of their guns were about to end his hopeless course. He passed rapidly by a known den, heading toward a very abrupt ravine, when all of a sudden the strong voice of the bear made him stop.

“Hide in there!” he said, and the wolf immediately turned his head to his left, toward a thick peanut bush, behind which, very close to him, the bear showed him something in the very direction which he came from. “The lair!” said the bear quickly. “Run inside! Nobody will look for you in a bear’s lair!”

“Is this another of your traps, mad one?” the wolf growled distrustfully.

“My traps are in a lower place, as you know, and if you go through the ravine you may very well meet one of them again. And if you don’t go through the ravine, you are lost anyway... from here, from above, you can be seen in any other direction!” The bear realized he had no other argument he could use to convince the wolf, but, surprisingly, the wolf made a decision without delay. Once he saw him in the den, the bear hid behind the bush. He knew it very well, since the last time, which was the way he had to follow with his little one, who was, as usual, next to him.

The two men arrived in front of the bear’s den, and one of them attracted the other’s attention toward it. Having prepared his gun, the hunter got close, with careful steps, to the new hiding place of the wolf. The bear was still behind the peanut bushes and, noticing the dangerous move of the newcomers, put the kitten down. “Stay here, and don’t get out until I tell you!” he whispered quickly. With one jump he was in front of the bush; he began to growl furiously, waving his paws. Now he was more trustful of the humans, and was hoping to make them understand he was only protecting his den. And anyway, no bear had ever been hunted in the forest....

Both humans turned their heads, surprised and scared by the threatening appearance of the bear, then began to move back, cautiously. The one who was closest to the den shouted something to the other, and the short answer of the latter made the former change direction and head, just as carefully, toward him. Both of them kept their guns lifted. Happy that he had managed to make the humans draw back, the bear turned to the bush behind which his kitten was hidden.

The next moment, a gunshot rent the deep silence of the forest. Then one more.... The bear fell softly on his back. He didn’t have time to see that the gray kitten, scared by the noise of the shots, ran away from the peanut bushes and hid in the den. With his eyes wide open, he looked at the sky for the last time. He wasn’t hopeless -- as were, in their last moments, all the animals which had known suffering only when they were hurt -- but only curious.... How come he didn’t feel any pain? What was going to follow?

In a few moments, the daylight turned off completely, but in its place another light, much warmer and stronger, of an endless peace, filled his soul unexpectedly. It was not a thought, but a feeling above all thoughts, that all was well the way it is with him now, and with the kitten that he was leaving behind, and with all the animals in the forest, and even with these two humans who had come here among them, following their own choices....

*

The hunters came closer and brutally pushed the bear's body with their guns' butts, then exchanged a couple of words and left. From the den, the attentive eyes and ears of the wolf had followed everything that happened. Because he stayed motionless, the little gray kitten didn't notice him when he entered the lair, but his heavy smell soon attracted his attention and then, immediately, their looks crossed. The kitten bristled with horror and began to growl louder and louder. The wolf put quickly one of his forepaws over the kitten and immobilized her, leaving her almost breathless. This weak and stupid creature could have disclosed them both!

A long time after he didn't hear the humans' steps anymore, the wolf spoke hoarsely, but calmly, to the kitten he was still keeping to the ground with his iron paw. "There is nobody for you here anymore, kitten! The hunters will come back, this is certain. Come with me! I can't promise you a better life than the one you have led so far, but I promise I will take care of you like you were my own cub."

The gray kitten was still keeping silent and frightened. The wolf freed her; she took refuge in the opposite corner of the den and huddled down to the earth, but didn't run.

"Your parent gave his life for me, kitten," said the wolf with great gravity. "For me, his enemy ... do you understand?! This is why, from now on, I will not touch any of the bear's friends and you will be safe with me."

"All I want is to see my father once again..." he heard the thin and frail voice of the kitten say. "If he ... is not alive anymore, as you say ... then there is nothing left for me here."

The wolf agreed in silence and rose slowly from the ground. On the one hand, he was afraid he wouldn't be able to understand this kitten, just as the kitten couldn't understand her adoptive parent, but on the other hand, he felt that a strange joy, unknown to him until then, began to grow in his heart. He was sure that his loneliness had ended. From that day on, a new life awaited him, mysterious and full of magical promises.

THE DEER

The deer was very young, but he had seen more things than he could acknowledge before any animal. Of all those beings he had had time so far to know in the forest, none would be so unprejudiced and fearless as to be able to trust him, if all the deer's secrets were to become known.

*

Several months after he had left the yard of the humans who rescued him when he was a helpless orphan, the deer ate some poisoned stalks, by mistake, which nearly killed him. He recovered with difficulty, after two days during which he lay like one dead, watched over with faith and patience by several unknown animals, which had disappeared before he woke up.

Nevertheless, he was left with a strange gift from this unusual experience. After a couple of days, when he opened his eyes in the morning, he could see the souls of certain animals who had already left this world. He had talked several times to an old and wise fox, who answered all his questions with great goodness and who confessed to him that, although many animals he had loved in his life were still in the forest, he was allowed to speak only with the deer. Most often, however, the deer experienced only some ghost-like visions, which he then surprisingly remembered better than if they had been real events of his own life. One morning he saw a massive, dark dog who was running like crazy on the bank of a river and then disappeared abruptly at the edge of a glade. In other circumstances, he had been very impressed, contemplating the image of a very thin marten, who was tossing on a large smooth stone, as if he were overcome by a fever, surrounded by an endless desert; or he had noticed a predator bird who was falling from a big height somewhere, after some very abrupt hills.

In time, however, these murky visions disappeared and instead, the deer could see around him all kinds of animals and birds who had died recently. Usually he saw them after he woke up, and for no longer than an hour; he quickly learned to distinguish them from those who were alive, not only because they could have no influence upon the things around them, but also because they didn't have that thin skin of light which covered the bodies of those who were alive -- and of course this light also shone around his own body, as he could notice in certain moments.

After all these events, the deer came to know some things about the life after life of the animals, but unfortunately, nothing of what he learned gave him much hope. It was clear that no matter how much most of these unhappy creatures suffered on earth, the suffering awaiting them beyond was much more intense and, besides, almost ceaseless. Very often they appeared to him to be tortured by a terrible hunger and thirst, which they couldn't satisfy at all, despite all their hopeless attempts and despite the fact that they could see, hear, and smell even better than in their previous existence. If they bent and tried to sip the brook's water, no drop of water recognized their touch; nor did any of the stones, plants, or animals of the world around them. Even if some of the creatures they met in their wanderings had been friends or family or mortal enemies, they never managed to make anyone feel their presence.

For their own part, they, poor fellows, seemed to suffer from an incurable stupidity and stubbornness, for they didn't stop even for one moment their hopeless efforts to continue their life according to the known pattern. This was the only thing that seemed to matter to them, and when the deer tried to talk to them several times, he was surprised to discover that, although they felt very well everything that was alive, like him, when he tried to get in touch with them, they brusquely seemed to stop feeling his presence. He became just as invisible to them as they themselves were to all the other creatures of the forest.

Nevertheless, the wise fox had seen, heard, and spoken very well with him. The deer couldn't quite understand the differences that were so great between the living and those who had passed away. But he remembered that the wise fox had told him many times that only the vices of the other animals' natures, all coming from the convenience and selfishness which suffocated in their souls any trace of understanding and compassion, were those which led them to this bitter fate.

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The deer was not fully convinced that things were this way, but the fact that some animals were very bad and cruel, even in their own families, appeared to him as something very easy to acknowledge. He knew, for instance, an old and sick rabbit who had killed with no mercy all the kits born in the family of one of his sisters and then blamed a peaceful badger, who lived in the vicinity. A wild tomcat who had recently come to live near a foxes' den killed three fawns, not because he was hungry, but only to demonstrate to the animals of the forest his great talents of predation. Several young birds had chased their brothers away from the nest, thus making them the certain prey of the numerous carnivores on the ground or in the air that were always in search of helpless creatures.

No, they were not few, those who made terrible mistakes in this life – however, the deer realized very well that the suffering they caused to all their victims could not be compared with the suffering that awaited them after passing away to their other life. This is why he decided to speak with some of the animals in question, without mentioning anything about his unusual gift of seeing, as the old and wise fox had always advised him. The deer realized that this advice was very good, because the animals took a malicious joy in declaring crazy and ceaselessly alienating any of them who had a more special nature than others of his kind.

The old fox had told him many times about the wisdom and goodness of The Great Spirit, who was the creator and supporter of all life, of all humans and animals, to whom many generations of beings had subjected themselves in the past with peace, happiness, and gratitude. But this was a teaching that the animals had long forgotten, and it seemed to the deer that the best thing he could do would be to convince his kind that they should follow again the example of goodness of their Creator, so that they would not be affected by endless suffering after the end of this life.

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“But there already is a wisdom school in the forest...” said the starling thoughtfully. “An owl is the teacher, and everybody knows that the great authority of this school comes precisely from the fact that The Great Spirit Himself was the one who gave a teaching, at the beginning, to owl kind.” The starling was the first friend the deer had made when he had come back to the forest. “Who do you think is going to listen to you?” the starling asked, directly and bluntly.

“First of all, the owls’ teaching is only for the birds, my friend,” answered the deer, very sure of himself. “And then, think about it -- it is such a complicated thing that very few get to really master it. But in the forest we need a teaching to be understood and applied by everyone. The ideas I want to convey to the animals do not require any kind of preparation. They are very simple, and anyone who tries to take them into account in his everyday life can quickly understand that they are also true.”

“You haven’t answered my question with these words, my dear...” continued the starling mildly. “Animals obey the traditions of their kind, the customs of the family they belong to and, in the best of cases, the advice of the owl, when all that I’ve mentioned before does not seem enough to them. Who will listen to you...?”

“There will be enough who will listen to me, my friend! You will see!” said the deer cheerfully. “Everybody needs this teaching. Without it, none can really be happy ... neither here, nor in the next world!”

“What next world are you talking about?” asked the starling, thrilled.

“In any other world beyond this forest!” answered the deer mysteriously.

*

“Do you know something? In fact, I have nothing against The Great Spirit, deer!” said the old and sick rabbit. “He is doing his part; I am doing mine. But as long as he doesn’t care to show any sign of benevolence to me, letting me suffer so badly that more than once I have wished for death, I really don’t know what kind of example I could take from him!”

*

In contrast, the wild tomcat seemed to have a very good relationship with The Great Spirit. “You are saying it very well, deer! It’s clear that The Great Spirit deserves all my admiration. Every time when I think more seriously about myself, and the fact that I am a creation of his, I realize that his wisdom and goodness have built in me the most wonderful work possible. I am grateful to him for making me and for letting me live in this big forest, where so many others can follow my example at any time!”

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“How can you say that The Great Spirit’s teaching is something very simple, deer?!” retorted the owl, angrily. “Don’t forget you are speaking with a professor! Who knows better than I do the heritage of wisdom which, in times immemorial, The Great Spirit left, through the owl kind, to all animals in the forest? Oh, a lifetime of study and our minds, so small, couldn’t possibly comprehend it! And you are coming now to tell us – from The Great Spirit, so to speak – to be good to each other and to believe in his endless goodness, as if this could be a teaching to someone! Whoever is stupid enough to listen to you and to deceive himself that he has been blessed with The Great Spirit’s teaching is free to do it, deer! As far as I know, the forest has never lacked fools. But don’t come to look for them in my school, because you are wasting your time!”

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That afternoon, the deer tried to start another conversation with a badger and with a hedgehog, but both of them looked at him strangely, then excused themselves, saying that they

were very busy with their families, and promised they would very soon look for him themselves, to talk. With a heavy heart, the deer decided to go back to his bed, but on his way he saw a muskrat who was working hard at a den that promised to be so big that it would be no wonder if a bear could fit inside it.

“Oh, what a wonderful home you are building, muskrat!” the deer praised.

“The otter will live here...” he growled in a deep voice, turning only halfway toward the other. “I hope she will be very happy in this home.”

“But you -- are you happy, muskrat?” asked the deer mildly. The muskrat stopped brusquely and turned heavily toward the one who dared to raise such an unusual question.

“What kind of question is that? Of course I’m happy ... I mean, as long as my best friend is happy, I don’t need anything else to be happy.”

“And are you really not interested in anything else except this?” the deer inquired, confused.

“You were speaking of happiness, weren’t you? Of course I’m not interested in anything else.”

The muskrat seemed to be as sincere as possible, so the deer excused himself for disturbing him, bade him farewell, and left in a hurry. This first day of trying to convey the message of The Great Spirit to the animals had been a total failure. He felt at a loss. But maybe he had made a mistake. Maybe he shouldn’t have talked with all the creatures who crossed his path, but from the beginning it would be better to look for only one animal, who wasn’t only interested in knowing a teaching of The Great Spirit, but who was also capable of understanding it. He could make this one his ally, and then of course his plan would have a better chance!

Finally, the deer stuck to this idea, and for a couple of days he walked through the forest greeting the animals whom he met, but studying each of them carefully. One evening, while he was heading to a glade with sweet grass, an unusual scene attracted his attention. In front of a fox’s lair, a gray female pigeon had covered with her wings a fellow creature who was lying on the ground; the deer knew he was still alive, because he had opened his eyes and was blinking gently, probably affected by the female pigeon’s words and touch. The deer stopped behind an old oak and carefully stretched his neck through the leaves, to watch the scene more closely. In a few moments, the gray female pigeon took off, immediately followed by her protégé, and all the deer could do was to follow them until they got lost beyond the tops of the highest firs. But now he knew whom he had to talk to. Besides, he knew where the pigeon family lived, so the next morning he went in a hurry to the forest’s edge where the deserted farm was. In an old ash near it, several pigeons were chatting happily, and the deer looked carefully among them for the gray

female pigeon. He found her immediately, for she was perched on one of the lowest branches of the tree, a little isolated from all the others. She had noticed him too and was fixing him with her eyes, a little worried.

“Dear female pigeon...” started the deer shyly, “I saw you and your friend yesterday, in front of the fox’s lair, but believe me, I’ve been looking for you for many days. If I don’t disturb you too much, I would like to speak with you about something ... something about The Great Spirit...”

As soon as she heard this name, the female pigeon rose from that tree and flew to another one twenty steps away. The deer was stunned, because he had managed to chase her away, too, with his very first words. The female pigeon, noticing his hesitation, cried after him immediately, “Come here, deer! I’m eager to listen to you!”

In a short time, the deer got to tell to the female pigeon his entire life, starting with that moment when he almost lost his life because of some poisoned stalks. Her looks, the words she had welcomed him with, her entire attitude, made him strongly believe that she could really understand him. He told her, of course, about his unsuccessful attempts to convince some of his acquaintances of the message of The Great Spirit. He admitted he didn’t know at all anymore how to get close to the animals and speak with them about this.

When he finally finished, the female pigeon had tears in her eyes, but these didn’t prevent her from speaking.

“Dear friend ... I’ve been looking myself for a while for the answer to the question that weighs on you. But it’s very hard now to make the animals believe in The Great Spirit ... even the best of them! Maybe the young ones could be convinced, in a way ... but their parents, who have gone through so many worries and pains and losses, cannot have confidence in the goodness and mercy of their creator. Too many times in their lives, they have wondered why so many bad things and so much suffering happen in the forest, if The Great Spirit exists; and, besides, if he watches over the animals ... without being able to find any answer to that....”

The deer discovered abruptly that he was totally disarmed, too, by this question. He admitted sincerely that, as far as he was concerned, he had never asked himself this question. When he had come into the forest, he didn’t believe in anything except friendship, and in the goodness he had seen so often in the humans who had raised him. But he hadn’t believed in The Great Spirit, and he hadn’t believed that beyond this life there is another life. Only the fact that The Great Spirit had given him all those unbelievable experiences made him accept the truth. But how could these things be conceived of by a female rabbit whose kits had all been killed, or an orphan badger who had lost both his parents, or a wild tomcat who cared only for himself, or a

muskrat who got completely lost in love for his girlfriend? Of course, it couldn't be easy for any of them to understand. But even so ... how could The Great Spirit be so carefree while such terrible things happened all the time in the forest? This question was pressing so hard on his soul, that he couldn't refrain anymore, and asked the female pigeon.

"Nothing that is bad and unnatural happens because The Great Spirit wants it," answered the female pigeon, with a passion and determination that touched the deer's heart. "Everybody does what they want in this forest, do you understand? Nobody is told what to do. Animals are born selfish and willing to survive at any cost, but in the lessons of their parents, of the forest, and of their own lives, they all have a chance to discover that truth which has been given to you without any effort, because you have such a strong spirit."

"Nevertheless ... where are the goodness and mercy of The Great Spirit, female pigeon?" asked the deer, still confused. "Here it is bad for the animals, and they are to blame for this. In the other world it is the same. Then how does the goodness of The Great Spirit manifest itself for all these weak creatures of his, who live here in error for a while, and then continue to live beyond, in even greater error?"

"Oh, deer, their very existence in this world, and especially its endless continuation in the other world, despite all possible errors, is an immeasurable goodness that comes from The Great Spirit's love. And all opportunities to recognize the truth, which The Great Spirit creates in the life that any animal lives here or in the beyond, are goodnesses of The Great Spirit. Think about it: you said yourself, once, that anybody's happiness depends on knowing the truth and on following it in their own life. Doesn't this mean, then, that the evil that somebody does is, in fact, a refusal of the happiness for which he was created?"

The deer remained thoughtful. Indeed, he hadn't thought that the suffering beyond, similar to that on earth, could not last an eternity. Neither had he thought that the end of the torture depended only on the goodwill of the suffering animal, because The Great Spirit keeps giving, in his great mercy, a lot of opportunities to easily understand the truth and to change. But how did the little female pigeon know all these wonderful things?

He lifted his head once again toward her and said with a slight hesitation in his voice, "Don't be upset with me, lady pigeon, but there is one question that won't let me live in peace."

"Why would you be afraid of me, my sweet deer? Please ask me any question, and I will try to answer it with pleasure, as far as I can."

"Well, then..." the deer continued, encouraged, "if I'm not being too indiscreet, I would like to know how you managed to learn all these wonderful mysteries of The Great Spirit."

The female pigeon looked at him, too, straight in the eyes, no less surprised. "In fact, I think I didn't know them either, my friend.... Now, while talking to you, these thoughts came to my mind for the first time. A strange feeling made me believe they are right, and I told them to you. And to be honest, after that I marveled at them, too...."

This time, the deer really didn't understand anything. "But then what should I do in order to bring this teaching of The Great Spirit to the animals? Can you tell me?"

"I have no thought related to this..." said the female pigeon sadly, after quite a long pause. "I haven't discovered so far a way that is suitable for me, either ... I know only that it isn't a very easy thing to do, and you will have to keep searching by yourself."

"But what if I am too stupid to do this?" insisted the deer, becoming sad as well.

"Nobody is left to be stupid, once he dares to do such thing!" answered the female pigeon, unexpectedly cheerful. This thought came to her mind for the first time, and it was right, and also surprised her.

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For two weeks after his discussion with the gray female pigeon, the deer tried to talk about The Great Spirit to all the animals that crossed his path, in all ways he could think of. He had been mild and peaceful; he endured their strange ideas about life and about The Great Spirit; he displayed an unusual interest in their problems and their family history -- but he couldn't change at all the very clear opinions they had so far. At a certain point he lost his patience and began to threaten them. Everyone was free to do whatever they wanted, but those who weren't listening to The Great Spirit's message would become their own victims! They were ignorant, lost, unhappy, and since they liked to be this way, they were preparing a terrible end for themselves.

His furious words succeeded in scaring some of the frailest creatures of the forest, who promised to listen to the new teaching at all costs, but all that his words could do to most of them was to chase them away from him. Some of the animals began to avoid him more and more, while others, malicious, threatened him that if he kept saying so many stupid things in the forest, he would find his end sooner than he expected.

The indifference, as well as this hostility, for which he had been totally unprepared, triggered a strong fury, which took over the deer's soul. Something must change at any cost in this forest, in which so many fools made a terrible error with their laziness and with their endless ill will! The Great Spirit had not revealed the truth to him for no good reason! Maybe it would be for the best if the foolish animals disappeared from here ... indeed, if they got beyond this world faster, even their suffering would be less on the other side, because the bad things they did here

would be fewer.... Besides, others who were still good would thus be saved, because they wouldn't suffer and wouldn't get worse in their turn because of the pain caused to them by the others.

"Maybe it's enough if I kill only some of them," thought the deer all of a sudden. "This will surely attract everyone's attention, and will give them a serious reason to think more about The Great Spirit!"

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The old sick rabbit had stretched out all his length, with his back against a big stone, on a deforested hill. His belly pains were almost ceaseless now, even in the night, but after he stayed for a while with his sick part under the sun, he could enjoy a couple of quieter hours, when he could sleep and eat.

The deer knew his habit very well, and he also knew that after the rabbit had finished his siesta, he got down to his lair on a narrow path which he himself had made, sheltered by some very thick blueberry and raspberry bushes. There he couldn't be seen by any large predator, but if somebody looked out for him from beyond the bushes, the rabbit couldn't see beyond the bushes, either. His sense of smell had long ago become unreliable, too, so the deer could very well wait for him there, then rush to him unexpectedly and trample him, before the rabbit knew what was happening. By his calculations, if the rabbit didn't have the inspiration to leave the path, he would surely be lost.

For a couple of days the deer kept thinking of this plan, and now he finally reached a decision. Hidden in the branches full of blueberries, he was waiting nervously for the rabbit to get up and start his descent down the path. The deer looked many times to the top of the hill; then a vague fear insinuated its way into his soul, and he looked down along the path. And suddenly, an unclear move attracted his attention down to the valley, one hundred steps away from the rabbit's lair. Among the trees it was difficult to discern what animal was moving there, and the wind blew from above, so he couldn't recognize the scent at all. But it seemed quite a big creature, so the deer prudently decided not to attract attention to himself. For the moment, all he could do was to follow the direction in which the unknown animal was moving, to make a decision. In a short time, the animal got close to a clearing surrounded by very tall fir trees, and the deer realized that had he gotten down a few steps away from the rabbit's path, he would have a good chance to see him. With regret, but without much hesitation, he crossed the path and, leaning against the cliff, a little lower on the hill, he stretched his neck carefully between the branches of a raspberry bush.

The clearing could be seen quite well, and he didn't have to wait more than a few moments until the animal made his appearance, from behind the firs. He was very thin, of a dirty gray, and was moving fast, but a little stiff. Between his feet, a very small animal was running with graceful jumps. The deer recognized them immediately. They were the grizzled wolf and the little kitten which he had adopted after the strange bear whom the animals had called "the mad one of the forest" died....

The deer had heard, more than once, the story of that wolf's incredible change, but until now he hadn't had the chance to verify its truth. But now that he had seen the two with his own eyes, he had no reason to doubt. The worst of the animals he had ever known had become a devoted parent to one of the most helpless creatures in the forest. In fact, hadn't the wolf been saved by the goodness of the bear ... and even twice, not only once? This thought struck him suddenly in his heart, like a sharp stone.

"But I ... then I..." he began to talk to himself, trying uselessly to shed a little light on his feelings. However, he was unexpectedly interrupted by a question that came from a source different from himself. Somebody ... somebody else asked him from his inside, and the words resounded directly in his heart, with a mildness, but also with a determination that made him shake: "But you ... would you be able to die for someone weaker than you?"

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That evening, the deer went to bed early, for he felt more tired than if he had run ceaselessly all day long. But the battle in his soul had ended. There was no trace in it of the dangerous fury that had been about to turn him into a killer. Now he understood very well that not only those who were sick or helpless were weak before The Great Spirit, but also those who got to live outside the natural order of the forest, because of their stupidity or lack of knowledge. He had no doubts anymore that these fellows must be helped, with all goodness and care, just like the others, because all animals of the forest – from the frailest to the strongest, from the best to the worst, from the most hardworking to the laziest – were intended to become, at a certain moment, beings totally worthy of their creator.

Toward morning, his deep sleep was interrupted by a very clear dream in which that big bear who had adopted the kittens was speaking before a meeting of all the forest animals. The wise wolf stayed on his left and was looking carefully at all those who were listening to the bear. The deer was reclining on the grass and looked at the speaker, fascinated. He couldn't discern clearly any of his words, but he understood perfectly what he was saying there, and this understanding gave him such a great happiness that he wished never to do anything other than

listen to the spell of that blessed animal. But the bear stopped quite soon, and then the deer looked around and was surprised to notice that, except for the gray female pigeon and an unknown woodpecker chick, who were both sitting on the same branch in a nearby tree, none of those who had been next to him earlier were there anymore. The bear had also disappeared, and this fact disappointed him very much. Nevertheless, the fox was still there, and noticing his sorrow, he came close to the deer, smiling. When the fox began to speak, the deer discovered immediately that he could very clearly understand all his words.

“Dear brother...” said he very warmly, “I’m very happy you are back, finally, on the good path. From now on, you will not need my advice, nor any other encouragement coming from an animal. For your endeavor and faith, The Great Spirit will bless you with some special gifts, through which you will be able to help your fellows of all kinds. This isn’t the right moment to talk to them about the truth. But soon the birds will decide to make only one school in this forest, out of a very old school and a very new one. Then there will be many who will be willing to listen to you.”

THE WILD TOMCAT

The wild tomcat had no friends. He tolerated around him only a family of nice foxes, with whom he went hunting sometimes during the day, but he didn't tolerate even those for too long. After they managed to catch a rabbit or a bigger bird together, the wild tomcat was the first to take his share, and then he would draw away into a tall tree, so as to not be compelled to communicate with anybody. If he were hungry again in the night, he got out of the the tree and came back again, in a short time, with new prey ... for during the night, the tomcat always proved to be an invincible hunter. Nevertheless, laziness, not hunting, was the favorite preoccupations of the tomcat.

He slept a lot and he dreamt a lot. In his most common dreams, the forest animals gathered in a circle around the tree where he was sitting and recognized him right away as the emperor of the forest, and the most intelligent, the most original, the most distinguished of the animals was then receiving this natural award for his merits, with a nobility full of modesty. Only then, the tomcat got down from the tree benevolently, fully conscious that he had a lot of things to teach to these nice subjects of his. He looked carefully at every one of them, feeling toward all of them as if they were a group of helpless kids who were always waiting for the teaching and the example of their parent. In this wonderful state, in which his mind was boiling with the zeal of numerous great ideas that came from his deep wisdom and goodness, the tomcat opened his mouth to share with everybody the endless magic of his being, but precisely then the dream ended, inevitably, leaving with him the bitterest taste possible....

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Unfortunately, the reality was completely different and the wild tomcat was, indeed, lucid enough to acknowledge it. The few animals who knew him well did consider him intelligent, unpredictable, skillful like nobody else in the art of hunting ... but strange and cold as well, too proud to approach. Although they had been hunting together for many days, the three fox cubs and their mother hadn't managed to become his friends. The fox mother knew that the little ones admired him secretly for his cruelty and pride – and this worried her more and more. The fights between them were more and more frequent, because each of them wanted to be like the wild cat – an incontestable leader. When the fox was not around, they sometimes fought with each other

cruelly, and she had lately discovered all kinds of small scars on their skin which marked these disputes that didn't look at all like kit play anymore. Several times they began fighting right in front of their mother, and she had to jump between them and threaten them with all her fury in order to separate them. Nevertheless, before getting to know the wild tomcat, the three kits had been very obedient and friendly. Who or what else could have changed them in such a short time? The fox mother sometimes remembered their first hunting with the wild tomcat. He challenged them to attack a lost fawn, and after the foxes had managed to stay in its way, the tomcat jumped directly on the head of the fawn and cleft its neck with his paws.

The kits, terribly impressed, didn't dare to come closer when the tomcat began to eat. He noticed their inhibition and spoke to them proudly: "You, slaves ... why are you afraid to come closer? You've helped me, so it would be unworthy of me not to acknowledge your merit. Get closer; I want to share today's prey with you."

Then the fox mother thought of that strange hedgehog, which she had tried to capture for a couple of days through all the crafty and secret means of her species. She sprinkled him with her urine to open his thorny clenched body, just like she did with others of his kind, but he didn't even move. She tumbled him easily to the brook, but the water was low in that warm summer month and the hedgehog, uncovered by the water, didn't get out of his impenetrable cover this time either. After about two hours, the fox had given up waiting and, answering the worried calls of her kits, came back to the den. In the next days she looked very patiently after the annoying hedgehog and she found him three more times, but all her attempts to deceive him proved to be just as useless. The last time, when she was just preparing to draw away, the wild tomcat got closer with unheard steps and sat down quietly next to the curled hedgehog. Then he began to talk to him calmly. The fox mother didn't know what the cat had said to her enemy, but she would have given anything to find out, because the effect of these words was that the hedgehog unexpectedly got his long nose out of his terrible fur and carefully looked at the one next to him, without taking into account at all the nearby presence of the fox. Even more surprisingly, the talk between the two continued for a long time, and the fox, humiliated, decided to leave to look for her kits. She was sure that the tomcat took the hedgehog as his ally only because the hedgehog proved to be more resistant and more intelligent than herself.

After that, the two began to meet more and more often, until there was no day when they didn't have something to do together. For a while, the fox kept looking out for the hedgehog, for she couldn't get her thoughts away from her shameful defeat. She wanted very much to catch him when he was unarmed, and finish with him. What a revenge that would be against the proud cat who didn't think twice about humiliating her, and who turned her good and obedient kits into little

monsters, like himself! Nevertheless, she didn't dare to take a risk, because she realized that had the hedgehog remained alive after this attack, his friend could find out, and then her kits would be in danger. She had had enough time to notice that the wild tomcat was merciless; when he was hurt, his fury couldn't be calmed down until his enemy -- or at least one of his enemy's babies -- lost its life.

It would be very well if she somehow managed to banish him from her family! It was true that hunting wouldn't be so easy anymore, and it wouldn't be easy for the little ones to break up, but she was sure that freeing them from the bad influence was much more important than these little inconveniences.

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The wild tomcat was fascinated by the strange hedgehog's wisdom. He, who moved so slowly, as if he were always sick; he, who would be the tomcat's certain victim had he not had his thorny breastplate, was in fact an animal capable of catching mice, like himself, of tasting the birds' eggs, like himself and, what was almost unconceivable, of killing poisonous snakes that all the other creatures of the forest ran away from, starting with the frail sparrow chick and ending with the huge bear.

But the hedgehog's stories were not about his heroic deeds, and not even about the more unusual deeds of other known animals. The hedgehog spoke of the customs and nature of the forest creatures, about the way their lives were tied to each other, about the connection of each kind of being with the grass, with their friends or enemies -- and even more, about the connection between the bees and the flowers, between the trees and the weather, between the water course and the animals' dens. The hedgehog seemed to know important things about all of the creatures and plants in the forest. When he was speaking about the forest, the tomcat seemed to step into a new and mysterious world, in which the colors and the movements of the landscape were given deep meanings by attractions and rejections of the elements the beings were made of ... and this different world, which was yet fully connected to what he knew from the reality of his experiences, bewitched his mind and cheered his heart.

Unfortunately, there was also a major inconvenience in this relationship between the wild tomcat and the hedgehog. The wonderful world of ideas and meanings in which the hedgehog lived was accessible to the tomcat only when the hedgehog was telling him his tales. When he was left alone, no matter how hard he tried to remember what his friend had told him or the feelings he had when he had listened to those things, he could remember only the fact that he had been very, very happy when he had heard those tales. But all ideas and images were lost, and

consequently he couldn't reach at all that wonderful state of the soul in which he wished he could live forever.... His discontent lasted, of course, until the next meeting with the hedgehog; soon he looked forward to these meetings three or even four times a day.

He was lucky that the hedgehog was a very benevolent individual. Besides, since he hadn't the experience of a strong friendship and since he lived accustomed to the indifference of the forest animals, at the beginning the hedgehog greatly appreciated the special relationship he had with the tomcat. However, little by little, the insistence of the tomcat upon meeting every day, and especially his astonishments, always the same, began to irritate him. He knew that the tomcat was an intelligent animal, who could hardly be deceived or ignored by another animal ... but he couldn't explain the fact that the tomcat had such a weak memory for his ideas. He was happy to have such a good listener, but the fact that the tomcat depended on him didn't seem healthy to him at all. Maybe he had done a bad thing by getting so close to such a different animal. He was seeing now that the tomcat tried very hard to leave the world which he lived in and which he was made for, to enjoy another world that was foreign to him, in which he couldn't exist even for one moment without the support and benevolence of another being.

This was why the hedgehog began to think of a solution through which the tomcat would go back to his world, or at least feel the need for the hedgehog's tales less frequently. He remembered that in the eastern part of the forest another cat was living, a smaller one, who had been for a long time under the protection of a lonely wolf. The wild tomcat had even met her at a certain point, but the fact that she was associated with the wolf made him avoid her.

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The fox mother couldn't have dreamed that her family's problem would find such a quick solution ... and without the least interference from her! For a while, the wild tomcat struck up a friendship with a gray cat and got to spend most of his time with her. From time to time, the two of them also met that mysterious hedgehog, toward whom the fox didn't have any resentment now, because it was he who had introduced the wild tomcat to the gray cat and, by talking patiently with them both, made them get closer little by little. She knew all these things because she had carefully followed the tomcat all the time, wanting to banish him as soon as possible from her cubs.

Now the proud animal hardly ever accompanied the family, but the new cat, who seemed really nice, hunted sometimes together with the fox kits and then left the entire prey to them. These gestures, together with the modesty and easiness of her character, granted her not only the respect but also the affection of all four foxes.

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The wild tomcat now enjoyed a much more pleasant and interesting life than in the times when the only beings around him were the foxes. His companion was full of cheeriness and tenderness. Not only when they hunted together, but also when she hunted alone, the gray cat took care that her friend got the best part of the prey. They became accustomed to sleeping together in an old fox lair underground, which the foxes offered to the gray cat as a gift. In a short time, the wild tomcat discovered with amazement and happiness that his girlfriend took a great pleasure in washing him and caressing him like a kitten, every time they retreated to their lair. Going to bed and waking up in her company soon became for him the most pleasant moments of the day. In fact, even when he was a kitten, the wild tomcat hadn't been caressed too much. His mother had been an active and rough being, for whom the only sign of affection which made sense in their relationship was to bring him, once or twice a day, several pieces of hunted prey.

But the wild tomcat didn't want to think about the past at all anymore. In this happy period of his life, the gates of new dreams seemed to have opened to him, much more wonderful than all he could touch until then in this imagination. For until then he hadn't known what friendship meant, nor knowledge. It seemed he had been very naïf, imagining that his older strengths and knowledge could be enough for him to be the leader of the forest animals. But now -- when he was seeing himself worthy of the love of the best and, besides, of the wisest animal -- only now was he ready. He was feeling clearly that there was more inside him than at any time in the past.

*

When the fox's youngest kit got lost in the forest, the gray cat took care of the other two brothers, while their mother looked ceaselessly for the poor little one for three days. The hedgehog spoke with all his acquaintances, asking them to let him know if they met him or if they found out something about him. Only the wild tomcat didn't think he could be helpful to the fox family. His friends had already done everything that could be done; they had even managed to exaggerate with their proofs of devotion. He was very discontented with the fact that he was receiving so little attention. The gray cat didn't hunt and didn't sleep with him anymore, but with the fox kits. Even in the few moments that they spent together, she seemed to be another animal. She talked only about foxes, about the news the hedgehog was coming with, about search plans, and even tried to find all kinds of business for him to do in this adventure that didn't interest him at all. As far as the hedgehog was concerned ... his disappointment was even greater. They met each other several times a day, but the tomcat didn't manage to speak with the hedgehog at all. At

any of the tomcat's questions, the hedgehog growled monosyllabically, then turned his back impolitely, as if he were always in a hurry to get rid of the tomcat's annoying presence. So he couldn't complain to any of his friends, because none of them seemed to be interested in him anymore. Maybe it would have been better not to get close at all to the strange hedgehog. Before getting to know this cunning creature, loneliness had never seemed painful to him.

*

In the morning when the fox mother and the lost kit came back, the gray cat was just trying once more to convince her friend to go to look for the little one. When she noticed that the two appeared, the gray cat was stunned for a moment, then jumped immediately before them and began to caress and nuzzle them with great joy. The fox cub was very scared and drew back a little at the beginning, but then, when he recognized their good friend, he came unstuck from his mother and put his head on the gray cat's chest, like a puppy. The fox mother called the others, too, right away, and the little ones, who were still asleep, opened their eyes brusquely and rushed to her with demanding whines. The hedgehog was napping in a bush near the cats' lair and he woke up, in his turn, confused because of the noise. He stretched gently in his place and then got his snout out cautiously through the leaves, but he found himself in front of the lost kit, who had heard him and had jumped to greet him.

In all this happy agitation, none of the heroes noticed the absence of the wild tomcat. But he was watching them all from the tree, and it wasn't happiness, but fury, which overcame his heart more and more. So none of them cared about him! Not even one of them felt sorry because he wasn't there! He needed only one look, and he would have gotten down immediately to greet the newcomers... But no! It was clear now that nobody thought of him. The wild tomcat jumped onto a branch of a nearby tree, then descended into a bush around it, getting farther from that place, which had become unbearable to him.

After the fox mother had leisurely told all the adventures of the rescue, and after the young cub had invented a story full of dangers and heroic struggles (which only his brothers believed), the gray cat disappeared. The fox mother smiled to herself, because she knew that her good friend had run to hunt for everybody.

*

Around noon, the gray cat came back not only with the prey, but also with her wild companion. He had caught three big fish, which he had brought one by one from the brook, with quite a bit of difficulty. He had greeted them all at once politely, including the newcomers, but

with a visible coldness. This didn't surprise the fox mother at all, but it surprised his hedgehog friend a little. He felt that something was happening with his friend, although he found no reason for this change.

The gray cat had appeared a little before that, and after all of them ate, the wild tomcat announced to them that he was tired and felt like idling in the tree for a while. The gray cat didn't say anything, but after another half an hour of talk with the foxes and with the hedgehog, she also drew back in the tree, next to her friend, who was pretending to sleep. When the cat clung close to him, the wild tomcat moved nervously and told her, annoyed, "I thought you would keep sleeping with your new family. You have no obligation to a casual acquaintance, do you?"

The gray cat sighed and asked him with patience, as if he were a kitten, "Why are you angry with me now? What we all have so much hoped for happened today, didn't it? Weren't you happy that the fox mother managed to find the little one, safe and sound?"

The wild tomcat looked aside and answered very seriously, "To tell you the truth, I didn't care if she found him or not. That kit was not my friend, and neither is anybody else in his family. And then, there have been enough kits younger than he who survived in the forest. I was one of them myself. Nevertheless, I might enjoy what happened, because it made you so happy ... but when I saw that the price of this selfish happiness was that I didn't exist for you anymore...."

The gray cat couldn't believe these words from her friend. For a few moments she had a sensation of darkness and couldn't think, as if she had received a strong blow directly to her head. Then she took a deep breath and broke forth with a strength that surprised even herself. "Selfish! I am selfish -- so says one who lives as if nothing more important than his incredible self existed in this forest! We are both cats, it's true -- but I cannot understand you! I'm telling you that I feel much closer to any of these foxes than to you!" The cat kept quiet for a couple of moments. She seemed to wait for the tomcat's answer, but he kept looking aside with coldness, without giving her the slightest impression that he had anything to say.

The cat took a deep breath and went on. "And since I cannot stay next to a creature whom I don't understand and who doesn't understand me ... I will go back tomorrow to my good father, the wolf! He is the only animal who really cares about me. I know very well that he is suffering a lot. When I gave him up, he gave up his happiness for the sake of mine. But anyway, you could never understand such a thing...."

The gray cat turned around, got down from the branch, and hid in the old foxes' lair. The wild tomcat first wanted to come after her, then changed his mind, because he didn't feel guilty at all and didn't want to make a gesture that could be interpreted as an acknowledgment of his imagined mistakes.

Shortly afterward he fell asleep, and since he was very tired, he slept until the next morning. When he woke up, he thought immediately about his girlfriend, and in a few moments he was at the entrance of the old lair. He stepped inside very carefully, holding his breath. But the lair was empty.

*

He didn't have time to get out, because the hedgehog stood in front of him. "It makes no sense to look for her here," he growled, irritated. "While you were asleep, she bid farewell to the foxes and to me. She said she was going to her wolf father, because she hadn't seen him for a long time, but she will come back any time we let her know we need her."

"What about me?" cried the wild tomcat, amazed, without taking into account at all the hedgehog's anger. "Didn't she leave a message, even a small one, for me, too?"

"Nothing," said the hedgehog, determined.

The wild tomcat avoided his glance. He was shaking in every limb and felt like asking his good friend a thousand questions. Only he could help him learn, know ... understand. He had never wished so much to understand something as he did in those moments.... But suddenly, he got stiff as if he were struck by lightning. He now knew he wouldn't ask him anything, no matter how much he wanted to. The hedgehog was a very intelligent animal, and the tomcat was sure that it wouldn't be long until he would discover him in all the splendor of his weakness ... for the best-kept secret of the tomcat was a terrible and crazy fear, which he didn't want to admit even to himself.

Indeed ... the wild tomcat, the most cruel and proud animal in the entire forest, was, in reality, the most faint-hearted of all. Every creature was afraid of something ... of a thing that could be named, looked at, avoided, or even opposed in one way or another. But the tomcat was afraid of something that was unseen and unheard, but enormous and omnipresent ... and the most courageous of his actions and even his dreams of glory were nothing else, in fact, than the most hopeless attempts to get rid of this terrible fear. He wasn't running away from anybody specific, but he was running away from this fear.

As long as the good gray cat had been next to him, the wild tomcat had completely forgotten it. Now, the frozen madness had come back into his heart brutally, and it seemed stronger than ever.

The tomcat raised his eyes toward the hedgehog and the latter discerned in them a cold, strange glitter, which he didn't know.

“She is welcome to stay with that old stupid wolf, if that is what she needs!” he said with disdain. “Anyway, she had begun to bore me....”

*

Half a year later, at the beginning of spring, the three fox kits separated from their mother and spread away in the forest. The fresh smells brought by the wind and the merry song of the birds triggered in them a strange restlessness that they couldn't understand yet. But the fox mother realized very well that this was the big sign of their coming maturity, and that she wasn't going to see her kits again until they found their own mates, with whom they could establish their own families. And if their homes were too far, or if The Great Spirit had other plans for them ... she might never see them again.

But in those sunny days, not even the wise hedgehog could find his place ... and only the fact that he didn't feel like leaving his friends kept him connected to that part of the forest in which he hadn't discovered so far even one trace of another of his kind. Had he given it a second thought, only the wild tomcat prevented him from leaving ... because the fox mother would have agreed with him without asking for any explanation, and would have been happy for him, as she would for herself. But the tomcat was like a spoiled kitten ... dependent, selfish, incapable of accepting defeat.

Nevertheless, that afternoon when he saw the wild tomcat attacking a lonely hedgehog cub, which was sleeping imprudently in a nest of dry leaves, the wise hedgehog could have no understanding for his friend anymore. He had called him as strongly as he could with his frail voice, but the tomcat seemed to be blind and deaf to anything that was foreign to the object of his preoccupation. But the hedgehog knew very well that he had been heard, and that everything happening in front of him was the result of deliberate choice. The little one didn't have any chance to escape, because the skillful hunter managed to catch him with his claws by his neck, then lifted him in the air, and the little one was inert, paralyzed by fear. The hedgehog realized the gravity of this moment and rushed desperately upon the tomcat, biting him gently on one of his hind paws. In the same moment, the tomcat let the prey fall and turned rapidly toward the attacker, hitting him over his snout with his strong claws. In a reflex, the hedgehog huddled into a ball, and only then the tomcat suddenly calmed down. Scared by what he had done, he drew back a few steps.

The hedgehog heard him getting farther away. He slowly pulled his bloody snout from his fur and asked with a frozen voice, “It really didn't matter to you that he was one of my kind, did it?”

The tomcat was silent; confused, he looked down. “Didn’t you care at all?” cried the hedgehog, this time in an accusing tone. He didn’t expect any answer and he already knew that, although this was the worst thing his friend had ever done to him, he was going to forgive him as easily as always.

“And ... why would I care?!” said the tomcat, suddenly inflamed. “Do you really think I care about any of the slave kind in this god-damned forest? The fact that I find you special enough to accept you around me as a friend isn’t enough for you?!”

“Yes, it is...” answered the hedgehog with a subdued voice. “It’s enough for me, my friend....”

In his heart there wasn’t any place for revolt, nor for fury anymore, for the pain was now much greater than that which had stabbed him when he felt the merciless claws of the tomcat on his skin.

He looked at the ground for a few moments, then rose heavily and went with careful steps toward the brook. The irritated tomcat also left to the fox’s lair, and climbed into his favorite place from the hollow oak tree.

Two days later he was still there. He hadn’t gotten down even once, although the fox called him many times ... with prayers, with threats, with all the stratagems her crafty mind could invent. On the morning of the third day, the fox woke up and looked immediately to the branch on which, as she had expected, the tomcat was sitting, awake and motionless. She called him in a friendly tone several times, then shouted to him furiously, “I understood that you don’t care about me, you strange creature! Now that you’ve made the hedgehog friend also leave, you’ve decided that it’s best for you to be alone ... well, you may very well be. This time, I will not come back here either!”

The wild tomcat wanted to say something, but as on many other occasions, he couldn’t find even the simplest word that would fit the situation. Weakened and helpless, he began to tremble so violently that he suddenly lost his balance and fell down to the base of the tree. The fox mother noticed his fall and rushed to him, worried that he’d had an accident.

The tomcat was already standing, but he rested the way he fell, with his back toward the fox. She looked at him surprised for a while, but since he was neither saying nor doing anything, she turned back and started on the road, determined. When she got to a hill thirty steps away, a stifled moan made her stop and look behind once again. The tomcat was still there, but now he turned on the spot and raised his eyes toward her.

Without thinking at all, the fox found herself calling that proud and cold animal with short, sorrowful whines which she used only for her kits. After she had fallen silent, he left right away,

but his steps were unsure and unnatural, for he kept his head directed to the earth. Nevertheless, this time he stopped only in front of his friend. When he then lifted his eyes toward her, the good animal noticed immediately the tears in those green, incomprehensible eyes.

A strange thrill went through her heart, swirled there for a few moments, then got up in her thoughts, and thus the fox understood for the first time that the souls of all animals in the forest have a mysterious part in them through which they share affinities which are much more profound than all the differences between them. However, unfortunately, none of them has the chance to notice this wonderful truth, except in the case of the most unusual circumstances of their destiny.

THE DOG

The dog had been tied to a tree at the forest's edge and left to die. Before that, his master had tried, four times, to abandon him in the deserted places of the town, but every time, he had managed to come back home in less than a day. He didn't know why his master kept subjecting him to these dangerous trials, but he supposed they were nothing more than tests of courage and perseverance, which he must overcome in order to prove that he was still a real dog.

The recent accident had shaken him up quite badly. He had lost all the teeth on one side of his jaw; he couldn't hear with one ear anymore, and once every couple of days he shook so badly that even the child, who was his best friend, ran away from him, shouting and crying as if he had a beast before him.

Nevertheless, he was still a real dog. He remembered everything ... he was doing exactly what he had done before -- and in particular, he loved everybody just as much as before. He was seeing very clearly that, in fact, it wasn't he who had changed, but only they.

The master didn't pat him on the head when he came back home. The child seemed to have begun to be afraid of him, and their play was now monotonous and devoid of cheer. Only his mistress kept talking nicely to him and caressing him, but even she looked at him much more rarely now. When he finally managed to look directly at her, he noticed, surprised, that her eyes were full of tears. Without a doubt, all of his humans seemed to the dog much more affected by that stupid accident of his than he himself was ... and their suffering increased his need to be close to them and to show them how much he loved them. If they wanted to put him on trial with those strange tests, he was ready to fight, to struggle, to endure, to overcome all privations and obstacles ... but only to see them happy and content with him, like before. This was why he didn't fight when his master put him in his car and left with him, taking him farther and farther away.

After the first time when he came back, he already knew clearly what was going to happen every time when his master took him from home, and this was why he deliberately got away from the car. Then, when his master slammed the door and started the engine, he hit his stride strongly and followed the car closely for about a hundred steps. On the one hand, he didn't want to do that, for this game seemed to have different rules, which he was determined to discover and follow. However, he could not refrain. Maybe he was hoping like crazy to be able to follow the car at least until it got home.... Or maybe he was hoping that the master would stop, impressed and

determined to put an end to his trials. He wasn't sure himself of the thoughts and feelings that animated him in those terrible rituals. Only one thought was clear and sure to him in all those moments: that through all these endeavors of his, sooner or later, it was impossible for him not to convince the ones at home that he was, as before, a real dog.

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The day when his master tied him to the tree, he strained as hard as he could to free himself. He tried to bite away the chain he was tied with for hours, despite the terrible pains which ripped not only his poor mutilated mouth, but every cell of his head. He didn't think of anything, didn't hear and didn't see anything around. Only his hopeless will moved him from the inside. Late into the night, physical exhaustion made it weaker and he lost consciousness.

When he woke up, it was evening again. He had a fever and was dizzy with pain. Nevertheless, his thirst was stronger than the pain.... He began to whine shyly, worried, but nobody seemed to be around. Suddenly, terror suffocated his soul and, with an unconceivable strength, the dog released from the depths of his being the most terrible yowl that his throat had ever been capable of. For a few moments, the whole forest stood still, penetrated by the fear and pain of the poor animal. For a quarter of an hour he yowled almost continuously; then, as unexpectedly as he had started, he finished. A young, daring female wolf had appeared next to him, smelling him with much interest.

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The master had been, once again, much more intelligent than the dog. The master had chained him, it's true, but he had left the old collar on his throat. It was made of leather, without spikes, and the master knew that when he would prove to be friendly with the animals of the forest, one of them would ally with him and bite away the collar, freeing him. But he had been a fool and strained like crazy to bite away the chain, instead of asking, from the beginning, for the help of his wild fellows.

This was the way in which the dog began to explain things to the young female wolf, after having drunk avidly from the cold puddle that mirrored the starry and friendly sky of the night. She, however, was not touched at all by the dog's admiration for the so-called "master."

"Humans are not masters," said she, determined, "but enemies! They are the greatest enemies of all animals. Any gesture of theirs hides deceit and a will to kill. They surely condemn even their dogs after they are of no use -- for their greed, or for the terrible and inconceivable interests that animate them...."

The dog was terribly revolted!

He had thought until then that he was a fool, but he was seeing here, in this world of wilderness, a much deeper and alarming folly, because it came from the bitterest possible lack of knowledge. He felt more than he thought that there weren't enough ideas in his small mind (much smaller than his master's) to convince his brothers from the forest of the greatness of the human being ... of the wonderful and innumerable joys that connection to the human being can give to an animal soul. And although he wanted to go back home with all the strength of his heart, the dog decided to stay a few more days in the forest in order to try to help his wild brothers understand that they must follow the dog's example and ally with the humans.

Indeed ... to go back home with this unexpected victory meant to finally make his master proud of him! What sense would other trials of his master make, as long as he gave proof of the greatest faith and love by bringing all the animals under his beneficent influence?

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After three days, the dog woke up alone. The female wolf had left him during the night. She had left to look for her pack, because in this foreign animal she couldn't find the smallest understanding. He was better than any of her companions, but nevertheless much more stupid than they. He was always saying the same things, which lacked any significance. Besides, he wanted her to be enchained too for her entire life, a toy in the merciless hands of the humans. But it was very clear to the female wolf that she would rather accept death than such a fate.

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The dog looked for her a lot. He suffered. He hadn't had an easy time with her either, but he didn't expect such a defeat. How could he convince another wild animal, when the one who was closest to him, as far as body and nature were concerned, turned her back on him so fast? He had probably made some mistake, and now was wandering lonely, under the burden of his guilt. He thought of his master, missing him very much; he thought of his mistress and of the child, and implored them to give him a wise thought that would guide his small and helpless mind. What did his mistress do when the child made mistakes, when the child repeated the same mistake a dozen times?

Yes ... the mistress didn't get tired of explaining gently to the child, of showing him again and again the good way to follow. Then, of course, he shouldn't do otherwise either. He had to explain the truth to the forest animals over and over again, as if they were his children ... until they would finally understand. He shouldn't go back home before that.

*

The next day, the dog met a badger as lonely as himself. But as opposed to the dog, the badger felt very well although he was alone. He was busy only with looking for food; he had a perseverance and energy that many animals admired, but nothing else interested him. He worked, ate, and slept. “What is life for?” said the badger. “Everybody knows there is no other reason, but some want to appear more interesting and special than the others, and this is why they maintain that they have also discovered other goals. But this is where all the bad in the world comes from ... the animals don’t mind their natural business, and they go crazy. And you...” said he to the dog, “you are, unfortunately, only one of the countless lazy mad animals who try to contaminate me. But none before you nor yourself, of course, have the slightest chance with a serious and sound-minded animal. Do you understand? Not even the slightest chance!”

The dog decided to begin his speech with a justification, but the badger didn’t listen to anything anymore and drew away shock-headed, growling and threatening.

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The next animal the dog met was a deer. Mistaking the dog at first for a wolf, the latter strained, preparing to run away, but the dog called to him mildly, as if he were a friend. The deer looked at him with interest, for he was a mature and wise creature, who was able to feel the soul of an animal at first sight, and who had become accustomed to listen to his fellow creatures and to help them when they were suffering. The dog immediately began to tell him about his wonderful life before the accident, in his master’s family and, to his great astonishment, the deer neither left nor interrupted him, but listened to him with a wonderful attention and patience. When the dog finished speaking, the deer seemed to be in such a profound state of dreaming that not long afterward, the dog couldn’t interrupt it. Then he finally dared to ask for the deer’s opinion.

The deer cleared his throat with emotion and began, in his turn, to tell his earliest memories. He had been raised by humans when he was very little, because his mother had disappeared from the forest one morning. He hadn’t managed to find out what had happened to her and, three days later, when the humans caught him, he was starving to death. He admitted that he was happy in the humans’ yard. He was never hungry in those times. He liked their caresses, their nice words. He even stroke up a friendship with a puppy who appeared in the yard a couple of days after him. But when he grew up, the longing for the forest made him gaze longingly over the fences. The humans saw this and, with many regrets, freed him.

He was never sorry for having chosen freedom. Nevertheless, there had been many days when he wished to go back to the house at the forest's edge at least once. But he didn't have the courage.... All creatures in the forest were afraid of humans, all spoke about the terrible things the humans did to the animals, and little by little the deer let himself be convinced that there was no greater risk for himself and for his kind than to be, by misfortune, around a human being. It was true that the humans sometimes protected the young of the wild animals, but they showed no mercy whatsoever toward the grown-up animals.

The dog interrupted the deer, showing him immediately how wrong this legend of the forest was, as could be proven by the fact that he himself, the cat, and other known animals that had a master were already mature beings. But the deer asked him if there were any mature animal coming from the forest who was under the protection of a master, and the dog had to admit, disappointed, that he didn't know such an animal.

"Nothing happens by accident," the deer then said resignedly. "This is one of The Great Spirit's most important lessons.... If we are not close to the human kind, it means it isn't time for that yet. Neither we, nor the man, nor any of us is good enough yet for such a relationship."

The dog remained thoughtful. "If you want us to talk more, my friend, let the forest know. All the animals know me, and I will always be glad to come to you, you can be sure of that!" said the deer and then started to go, with his majestic steps, toward the heart of the forest.

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The dog didn't really know what to tell the animals anymore. What else was there to say, now that he himself wasn't so sure of the truth of his cause?

Nevertheless, something inside him told him very clearly that he must keep believing and endeavoring. He must find somebody, after all! He couldn't go back home without bringing with him at least one other servant devoted to his master!

Tortured by doubts and fears, he didn't even notice when a small fox cut across his path. She was running with a mouse that was still alive in her mouth and, noticing the dog at the last moment, she got so scared that she let the mouse fall, and he disappeared immediately into the thick foliage of a bush at the base of a nearby tree. The fox turned back, but as she didn't have the courage to face the dog once again, she hid behind a bush in the vicinity. The dog saw her and began to ask her to help him get some food, because he had eaten only insects in the last couple of days and felt he was fainting with hunger. The fox became more courageous. Maybe she could hunt better together with this foreign animal ... and maybe she could finally have an ally in this forest full of selfish wild animals.

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For one week, the fox and the dog got along together very well. He was so delighted by the intelligence and good humor of his little friend that he forgot to tell her about the humans. In fact, he thought many times about his masters, but every time when he wanted to tell the fox about them, other new and interesting things to talk about or to do came up. He felt he could never get bored next to such a smart and inventive animal.

One pleasant summer evening, the fox asked the dog how he got to the forest. She had been here ever since she was born, but she had never seen him before that affair with the mouse.

This was what the dog had been waiting for! He began to tell her with passion his entire life, since his master bought him from the animal shop until that thrilling discussion with the deer. The fox was amazed and delighted. She had never heard such a complicated and impressive story. Now she was fully convinced that her friend was not an animal like all the others. She understood that he got to the forest only because the humans had changed, becoming as bad to him as they were to many of the forest animals.

For the first time since they had been together, the dog was discontent with her words. What kind of understanding was this?! He explained to her leisurely how his master had decided to make him stronger, to make him prove he was a real dog. His master thought of him not as of some object that was good to be kept, but as a dignified creature, who had his own way in life. There was nothing more exciting than the fact that his master loved him so much that he gave him up willingly for a while, for him to become wiser and stronger....

The fox remained silent for a long time. The dog was almost sure that this was his great victory: he finally managed to convince one animal of the forest ... and not just any one of them, but actually the most intelligent one!

“I will show you something...” whispered the fox and got quickly down to the valley, heading toward the forest’s edge. The dog followed her, curious and eager for a new surprise. When they stopped, after half an hour, the fox seemed confused. She asked him to wait a little and slipped behind a thick bush, nosing carefully. She came back very soon and then led the dog about fifty more steps, to a very old tree at the brook edge. The tree was surrounded by a thick chain, which ended with a thick leather collar. Next to the collar, at the tree’s root, there were a big dog skull and several yellow bones.

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The fox fixed him with a tense attention. The dog got close to the tree slowly, then stopped with his nose to the ground and, unexpectedly, ran away.

He ran like mad until his sight got dark and he felt the strong beat of his heart in his throat. His girlfriend didn't manage to follow him.... He was alone, once more. But he was also free for the first time, split from the humans who had deceived him and had tried to kill him, disconnected from the past forever. He felt the crazy fear of the wild animal growing in his heart, but fury caught it rapidly from behind.

So they had been right ... all the animals, in their special way, had been right as far as humans were concerned! Only he, the world's fool, had lived in illusion and deceit his entire life! And had he not met the female wolf and, later on, this nice fox, he would have lived in deceit until his very last moment. Maybe his destiny was precisely contrary to that in which he believed during these last days. It wasn't the wild animals who had to be told the truth and brought to reality, but the rest ... the innumerable array of ignorant beings who were still living in the criminal shade of mankind.... But how could a poor animal, with his weak power of persuasion, get beyond the malignant intelligence of the human being?

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It would be good to speak with the forest animals, to try to make them fight together with the domestic ones. But the wild animals were selfish and too afraid of the humans to risk their lives for such a cause. Maybe all that he could do was to fight alone ... to go to the town during the night and cause as much damage and trouble as he could on the humans' farms -- for mutilated as he was, he couldn't kill them. He could get a child down, but he didn't have enough hatred to take the life of a human's cub. The dog was sure that, like all the animals' cubs, the humans' cubs were, in fact, much better than those who gave them birth; unfortunately, as they grew up, the innocence and warmth in their hearts faded away little by little, suffocated by the bad influence of the grown-up ones around them.

*

In the forest they now talked about the dog as if he were a great hero. None of those who were alive now, nor those whom the animals could remember, would dare to leave the forest so many times to steal or destroy things that belonged to humans. Nobody had ever put such a small price on his own life.

But when the dog heard from the fox that a human had come to live in the forest, his anger almost made him threaten her with her life. How could she tell him something so terrible without

a shudder? Didn't she realize that this was the beginning of the end for all the animals in the forest?

Humankind had its law, its right, its endless greed.... All its thoughts were determined by its interests, and nothing was of interest except if it could in some way increase a human's pleasure or comfort.

Poor creatures of the forest ... from now on, no hollow, no den, not even the nest on the top of the tallest tree would be safe anymore! Maybe there was one more chance. If they all rose up and chased away the rascal....

The fox didn't let him continue. "Nobody will rise up, my friend. All the animals who met him say this human is different. It sleeps during the night in a house made of trees, and in the day it handles all kinds of strange objects through which it patiently watches the animals, but without doing them any harm. Not only that; the human leaves them all in peace, but always brings food for those who are poor."

She had let herself be caressed by the human several times, and admitted that this touch made her very happy. Maybe the first idea of the dog was not that absurd. The animals might get close, in time, to such human beings....

*

The dog was fully convinced that a great danger threatened his brothers of the forest. The better the things seemed to be between animals and humans, the greater must be the deceit. However, this time he didn't show openly his fear and fury. He only asked the fox to lead him to the stranger's house, to convince himself of the human's benevolence.

The walk took about one hour and a half. It was noon when they got to the house and discovered that the human was lying in the middle of a clearing nearby and looking attentively through one of the instruments at an old oak, full of hollows. The dog asked the fox to draw back a few steps, explaining to her that he wanted to be the only one who was seen. He had to convince himself, with his own senses, that there wasn't the slightest danger here for the animals.

The fox drew back a little, and the dog crept toward the human. He stopped ten steps behind and gathered all his strength. He was conscious that he would have to bite, this time ... his furious bark alone would not be enough to chase the human away. Besides, the animals would hear him, and he wasn't very sure on whose side they would be. He huddled tensely for a few moments... and threw himself toward the human.

However, he couldn't bite. He found himself next to the human's leg and drew back a little, barking like mad.

But the human was a woman, who turned her head immediately and, with no hesitation, put her hand forward gently toward the dog's snout. Her black, smiling eyes looked directly into the brown, scared eyes of the animal. "Hush, hush, boy ... don't get angry with me, I don't want to do anything bad to you..." she whispered a couple of times, with a warm, deep voice.

For the dog, time had already perished. All his muscles were like stone, and his heart threatened to break his chest, when she began to gently caress the top of his snout, then the mutilated jaw, then, with soft moves, his entire head.

All of a sudden, the dog calmed down profoundly. If the forest were on fire in one moment or if the sky shed upon him an entire sea, he wouldn't have cared about that, or about anything anymore. He felt like sitting down and leaning against that unknown body, closing his eyes. A wonderful warmth gathered from his soul and spread out immediately, like a mysterious caress and recognition, in that part of his body touching that being, whom the dog loved as if he had known her forever. The woman smiled, then put an arm over his back and hugged him a little, with gentleness.

"What are you saying, boy ... do you think you could take better care of your friends together with me?"

THE FOX

She remembered that her father had been sick, too, before dying. In the last days of his life, he had done no more than drink a few drops of water. He had cringed in the lair and groaned slightly, turning painfully from one side to the other, while his entire family was in torment, trying to convince him to go out again into the light.

He had been, until several months ago, the strongest and the wisest male fox of his kind, the only one who had had the courage to hunt beyond the enormous cultivated fields of the humans, in another forest. And not only once.

But not long after his fourth far-away adventure, the male fox's fur had begun falling out in large tufts. He recovered quite soon, but instead, he began to cough harder and harder, almost choking. Surprisingly, this phase didn't last more than several weeks either. Then it ended as abruptly as it had started, giving way to new and unsuspected weaknesses. The light began to disturb him increasingly, and he felt dizzy more and more often. Sometimes, his hind legs couldn't support him anymore, and then he had to sit. After a while, he couldn't manage to stand at all anymore and, with his last strength, he crept on his belly toward his lair, which he had built when the bad sickness had begun, and where he preferred to live alone. He was already nearly blind, but was still attentive to everything that happened, and ate with appetite all that his careful family members threw inside the lair.

In those moments, they all knew he was very sick, but none could imagine he would die. Anyone could have died in the fox clan, because there was none who didn't have a weakness known by everybody ... but not the father – the hero, the invincible, the defender and leader of the whole family. He was the only one to know that he could die from his sickness, because he had seen, long time ago, in his youth, four other foxes who had died after a suffering identical to his. They were his mother, his father, and his two brothers ... but none of the members of the family he had now ever learned this.

*

After one year, the fox still suffered bitterly from her father's loss. But it seemed that after his death, she had never thought of him so much as she did in these days, when she was sick herself. The terrible cough which had weakened her a lot lately began to diminish, but she

sometimes felt such a weakness in her entire body that all she could do was sit and wait patiently for the dizziness to go away. Her life was in great danger because of this frail state, in which any predator – even one who was smaller than she -- could have killed her without facing the slightest resistance. This was why she was tempted to draw back into her father's lair and abandon herself to her family's care, which would have been full of affection. But just like her father, who hadn't given up fighting as long as he had been able to stand, the fox decided not to unduly encumber her family. Even more ... not only now, but even later, she shouldn't become a burden in any way!

This was why, one evening, the kits, their mother (who was her sister), and her two younger brothers all came back to the lair, and waited uselessly for the fox to appear. They finally fell asleep worried, but hoping she would be back during the night, as sometimes happened with all of them, when hunting in the daylight didn't prove to be effective.

But morning came and went, without her making an appearance. She didn't show up during the rest of the day either, nor in the night, nor in the following days -- and all the desperate searches of the family members proved to be useless.

*

The fox had woken up in the morning before all the others. She had quickly gobbled a few scraps left over from the dinner the night before; then she threw a quick glance at the members of her family, and left the den.

She headed toward the west, and at noon, she was tired and rested on the top of a naked hill, looking back with emotion. She could see the forest far away, covering several taller hills, beyond the big yellow fields of the humans. Not long ago, her father had told her some of his adventures in another forest, which was beyond a big lake toward the west. The fox didn't know where to go, but she was sure she wouldn't be able to survive more than a few days outside a forest, so she decided to try to discover the lake. She didn't imagine that this walk would take a whole day for a healthy animal. In her case, it was going to take two. Anyway, she was lucky from the beginning, because the rains had been abundant in the last days and she could find water puddles all over the place, which could allay her thirst.

After nightfall the poor fox stopped, exhausted. Even if she could have walked farther, there would have been no reason to do so, since in the dark she could easily make a mistake and go the wrong way. So she had to go to sleep in that very field, and she fell asleep with great difficulty, fearing the dogs that the humans sometimes let free during the night.

But since she was so tired, she slept deeply, almost until the noon of the next day. She woke up abruptly and jumped rapidly to her feet, because she first thought of the humans and of

their dogs. She started on her way without delay and walked slowly, but almost continuously, for half a day. Then the hunger that had bitterly tortured her since she woke up made her collapse.

After recovering from the faint, she looked around fearfully and crept with difficulty to the shade of a nearby bush. A painful thought immediately came to her mind: that by leaving her family she had chosen, without realizing it, to die of hunger. But suddenly she heard behind her a weak sound of stepped-upon leaves. In one moment, she forgot her hopelessness and jumped from her place, agitated. Looking in the direction of the noise she noticed, surprised, a big heavy frog who was getting farther from the bush, but who was in no hurry. With new strength, she followed the frog immediately, but unfortunately the mechanical jumps of the scared frog proved to be twice as long as her own deplorable hops. After a couple of the fox's unsuccessful attempts, the frog disappeared unexpectedly behind a tall herb with bad-smelling flowers. The fox drew near cautiously and got her snout through the fleshy leaves, in search of her prey. But what she saw there made her completely forget about the frog.

A very large marshy puddle lay before her, and beyond the opposite shore there lay a line of trees that seemed to be the border of a thick forest. The fox thought immediately that the lake her father had seen years ago could not be anything other than this swampy and dark water. She didn't know why she was so sure. Not only the nearby margin of a forest, but also the feeling of profound sadness which the heavy and gloomy move of the waves awakened in her, convinced her that, unexpectedly, she really had managed to get close to the place she had dreamt of. She started to bypass the marsh and, after she got to the other side, she discovered that she still had to traverse a big piece of land before she got to the forest -- a land full of bushes and thorns.

She decided not to tire herself out, so until she got to the forest she stopped three times to rest a little. When she got up after the last stop, she noticed several frail green lizards in the grass, who were resting next to each other under the mild rays of the afternoon sun. These helpless creatures, like the frog she had met before, were a prey which, just two months ago, had seemed unworthy of an animal from her family. But now they seemed too good for her weak powers.... She chased them all at once, more excited and unskilled than a three-month kit. The lizards disappeared quite quickly under some wide stones, and the fox, sad and exhausted, sat on a piece of moss in the vicinity and let her snout hang down sadly over her four paws.

She thought again, with nostalgia, of each of her family members ... their goodness, their care for her and, oh ... the warm and welcoming shelter of the den.... She had already forgotten why she had decided to leave them. Probably the bad spirits of the forest drove her crazy, for otherwise she couldn't have reached such a hopeless situation.... She closed her eyes, trying very hard to convince herself that she was living just an ugly dream. When she opened them again, a

cold chill shook her entire body. She hadn't dreamt anything! Hunger was going to kill her sooner than she would expect in this foreign land, and none of the members of her family would ever find out anything about her!

Two big tears descended slowly on her snout. The fox closed her eyes again and remained in her place, motionless.

*

In the evening, a strange itch on her back woke her up. She suddenly turned her head and when she looked back, her breath was a gasp of horror. A huge deer had bent his head toward her and one of his most dangerous horns, the one in front of his right eye, almost touched her fur. Like all the carnivorous animals of the forest, the fox knew very well that the deer almost never made a mistake when he used such a horn; it was even a more sure and cruel weapon than the humans' guns. She didn't have time to run, because the deer was as quick as she was in his reactions. She decided to pretend to be seriously injured, and let herself fall on one side as slowly as she could, uncovering her belly.

But the deer didn't seem to intend to be aggressive, for he got his head straight and addressed her very calmly.

"You don't have to be afraid of me at all.... Believe me, I am here just to save you. I know your mother. When both of us were still young, we were very good friends. She looked for me two days ago to tell me what happened to you, and she asked me to help. This is my occupation, you know ... I help sick animals ... and after all she had told me, I knew right away what I had to do...."

The fox began to tremble with emotion ... her mother ... the deer ... they were friends... salvation! Her dear world got close again to her soul, and this happened only because this big and nice animal spoke a couple of words to her. She was happy, but at the same time, terribly embarrassed by her own misery, so she didn't dare to raise her eyes.

With one of his forelegs, the deer pushed a very big and long leaf toward the fox's snout. The leaf was folded along its central vein.

"Look at this!" said he, determined, and opened the leaf, with the same leg, right in front of the amazed fox. "These green husks are a special food of the humans. I know you have never tasted such a thing so far and it will be very hard to you to chew them, but they are very nourishing and will give you enough strength to be able to get along by yourself in less than one day. No matter how hard it is, for the sake of your belly, try to chew them and not gulp them down. As far as these yellow flowers with round leaves are concerned – you know them very

well, for you have seen them many times in the sunnier, loam-rich areas of our forest. But what you haven't known so far is that they are the best cure, left by The Great Spirit of the Forest, for the healing of your sickness. But be careful! You must eat only two stalks in one day, otherwise they can become a real poison to your body. Even after you recover, you must keep eating these herbs every day, until the beginning of autumn."

The deer took a short break, as if to check whether the fox was attentive, and then went on, content. "However, I must also tell you that this cure has an effect only if you manage to face one of the most difficult challenges for an animal like you. Maybe this condition seems strange to you ... but I can assure you that it's a thing which The Great Spirit cares about so much, that in its absence, the herb has no healing power anymore."

The fox was already feeling such an internal mobilization that no condition seemed too harsh to her. She asked with a merry voice, "What do I have to do, good deer? Since life is given back to me, I could make a small effort in exchange ... don't you think so?"

The deer looked at her, concentrated, and in his neutral reply there was nothing that could spoil her happiness.

"Indeed, it isn't a very difficult thing ... but you must not forget about it even for one moment, until you carry it through. Otherwise, you might spoil everything without even realizing it."

"Tell me, please..." insisted the fox eagerly.

"All you have to do is strike up a friendship with the first animal that awakens in you the desire to kill him," answered the deer in a very natural tone.

"This is it? This is all?... I can't believe this is all I am asked to do!" cried the poor fox enthusiastically.

"This is all -- and it isn't a small thing, my dear..." said the deer, almost whispering. "I must go now. If you happen to have any problems, tell the animals around you to look for me. There are many who know me, so it will not take long for your call to get to me."

All the fox had time to do was open her mouth, because the deer drew away with a couple of rapid jumps and disappeared beyond the thickets of the forest. "I thank you with all my heart, my friend!" she shouted behind him with all her strength. "Thank you," she repeated several times in her thoughts, fully convinced that the wonderful deer was capable of hearing her even this way.

*

The husks of the humans had, indeed, a terrible taste, so the fox began to gulp them down. Because she was so hungry, it wasn't hard for her to finish them all in just a few moments.

When none of them was left, she felt invaded by a terrible sorrow. There had to be something left -- one more piece, one more bean at least. She turned the leaf on all sides; she looked everywhere around. Unfortunately, she didn't find anything. She sat down disappointed, but then noticed that, in fact, her belly was full. Of course, she could swallow several times as many husks, or some dry skins of rabbit, or even some addle eggs, but it was not hunger that would drive her.

Satisfied, she thought she already was on the right path. Although before that day she couldn't conceive of such a thing, she had managed to fill her stomach only with some herbs of the humans. Suddenly she remembered the yellow flowers. She was on the right path only now, for not long ago she had simply forgotten about her sickness. She took two stalks into her mouth with much enthusiasm and began to chew them. In only a few moments, her entire face doubled up horribly as if she suffered a torture of incomparable cruelty. Her tongue got thicker and turned purple, and thick white foam formed inside her mouth, which she could only spit out immediately, together with the green herbs which she hadn't been able to swallow yet.

Oh ... the husks were a real delicacy compared to these. Only the fact that she hadn't had the experience of tasting them made her declare them terrible.... But now that she had it, her decision was made. She would rather die than make a feast of these dainties! Of course, she didn't know death ... but it seemed to her very hard to imagine that death could be worse for her than these accursed herbs.

The fox ran toward a small, nearby puddle, which she had passed by on her way to the forest, and drank more water than she would drink in three days under normal circumstances. When she finally felt that she had calmed her disgust, she got up and left, heavy, to a nearby bush. There she let herself fall on one side and, despite the fact that she intended to think a little about the very special things she had experienced that day, she fell asleep.

*

A few hours later, in that terribly dark night, the fox dreamt that she had fallen into a very deep pit, populated by countless snakes. At the beginning they hesitated to get very close to her, but then, probably feeling how scared she was, they started to get close and to bite her. More and more of them descended upon her. When the pain became unbearable, she woke up. But this didn't change anything. The pain kept being unbearable, because her poor intestines panted and tied to each other, subjected to a suffering which went beyond anything she had experienced in her entire life. The fox rushed to drink some water, but this didn't make her Calvary any easier. After having tried without success all possible positions, she jumped to her feet and started to run

in a circle. At the beginning she felt that the pain diminished, but in less than a quarter of an hour it came back, with the same intensity.

She collapsed in a twisted position, shaking with all the fibers of her being. Then she remembered the husks ... the husks she hadn't chewed, as the deer had advised her, but which she had gobbled! Now she knew she deserved that pain and, at the same time, that she would overcome it at a certain point ... but she simply could not wait. Her father told her once that one or more small and short sufferings can, under certain circumstances, heal you of a greater suffering. She had known another suffering several hours ago, and now she really wasn't afraid of living it once again.

Moving as if her whole body were full of needles, the fox managed with difficulty to go back to the place where she had rested in the afternoon, and she looked for the stalks with yellow flowers by using her sense of smell. She found them and gulped two of them with determination.

This time they didn't seem so bad to her. The pain had overcome the disgust. She managed to swallow them quite quickly, and then drank some water.

Half an hour later, the only thing she felt was a pleasant weight in her entire body and a slight dizziness from which, without realizing it, she slipped into a dream.

*

She woke up easily in the morning and carefully inspected her physical condition. It was incredible, but after many weeks she was feeling really well. She had almost forgotten how it was to feel this way! From now on she decided to make the effort to swallow those little miraculous herbs every day. Full of enthusiasm, she entered the new forest. The similarity between this one and the place where she had been born was so great that for a couple of hours all she did was to take a walk and enjoy the landscape. But at a certain moment, hunger began to nag at her stomach again.

She kept on walking, but her moves became more prudent, more hidden, almost without her being aware of it. She slipped unheard through the tall grass of a glade, when she noticed a young rat, of medium size, who was lingering in one place, in a tense attitude, looking out for one of the smaller animals of the forest, in his turn. The fox jumped toward him, and only when she landed did the rat hear something and turn back. But it was too late, for the fox had just finished her second jump in his direction, so that she was capable of strangling him before he even realized what was happening.

She couldn't believe that she had succeeded! The fact that she had regained her strength made her happy once again, thinking that she was on the right path. She began to eat heartily; then

she unexpectedly stopped, got up, and began carefully to look for something in the grass around her. She suddenly snatched something from the ground and rapidly returned to her prey. The two bewitched stalks were chewed and swallowed together with the meat, and this solved to a great extent the inconveniences of the cure. She was still hungry, so she also hunted a lost rabbit kit and, delighted as she was with her new powers, a little and very colorful bird. But as far as eating was concerned, she couldn't eat the latter. Full and extremely content, she drew back under the bush at the root of an old beech and went to sleep.

*

The next day, she walked around and looked for a place to arrange a den for herself.

Quite soon she found a little hill on which a thick shrub was growing and she began to dig, in no hurry, on an edge of it that had less foliage. Of course, there was no need for a very special arrangement, for she wasn't planning to remain here for the autumn. After the end of the stalk cure, when she would be a really healthy animal again, she could calmly go back home.

As if by accident, however, while she was working on the den, she began to cough. At the beginning she tried not to take into account this unpleasant happening, thinking that it was due to the fact that it had been a long time since she had made any serious effort. After a while, the cough intensified so much that the fox had to stop working, depressed. She sat down at the pit's edge, which was three palms wide, and tried to breathe as regularly as possible. She knew from past experience that this method got her out of the crisis quite quickly. She had tried it many times, before leaving from home ... before leaving to where she was now.... Did this mean that she was sick again?!

The fox was amazed and, at the same time, horror-stricken. But if this were true, then the deer, her mother's friend, had deceived her with his wonderful recipe. Maybe he was a mad animal or a criminal ... maybe he didn't even know her mother! A suffocating fear of loneliness covered her heart like a huge black water, and the fox breathed instinctively, like one who was about to drown. With a hopeless effort of will, she strained to think.

What mistake had she made in this entire story? She remembered the way she left her home, the apparition of the frog and the unexpected discovery of the marsh, the embarrassing attempt to catch the lizards, her extraordinary meeting with the deer, the unpleasant adventures with the green stalks and the husks, the hunting of the rat ... and suddenly she understood! The deer had told her that if she did not establish a friendship with the first animal she wanted to kill, his miraculous cure would have no value. Not only had she not struck up a friendship with the first creature -- she had killed him and devoured him without any trace of remorse!

She got up without delay and began to wander through the forest, looking for a creature whom she could make her friend. She met all kinds of animals, among which there were a rabbit cub, a squirrel, and two helpless mice, but she realized that a possible friendship between her and any of these was not at all a solution, as long as now she didn't feel like hunting any of them. How wise the reckoning of The Great Spirit was when he put the condition that the first animal she wanted to kill should be the one chosen to be her friend!

Whether she had one more chance, after all that she had done, only the good deer could know. The fox spent the rest of her day telling all the animals she met that she was very sick and she wanted to meet the deer.

When it began to get dark, she headed, tired, toward her bed, planning to dig more in order to turn it into a lair. Passing with her unheard step through the tall grass of a glade, her sight was attracted to a small movement somewhere in the vicinity. Only a few steps in front of her, next to a scrubby bush with wide leaves, she noticed a gray pigeon that seemed to pick up something from the ground: once in every few moments he lifted his head and looked carefully around, then he let it down with a very fast motion, thus disappearing completely in the grass. Since the fox didn't move at all, the bird did not feel her presence, but this unexpected hide-and-seek game lit the inner fire of the predator. Instinctively, the fox huddled down and stretched her head in the direction of the pigeon, preparing to jump.

But this time The Great Spirit blessed her for a moment and a good thought rose in her heart. Instead of attacking, the fox drew back a couple of steps and uttered in a voice strangled with emotion. "I'm lonely and very ill ... would you think I was being too bold if I asked you to be my friend?"

From the very first word, the bird took off toward a nearby tree. From there he turned a curious eye to the fox.

"I realize you cannot believe me," cried she hopelessly after the pigeon, "but if I don't succeed in making a friend as soon as possible, I'm dead -- do you understand?"

The pigeon remained silent, but his patience and attention gave the fox hope and inspiration. "My life depends on your goodwill now. In this moment you really are my life's master, and your friendship would be for me nothing less than the act of a merciful master.... Answer me, I implore you -- don't let me be tortured!"

The pigeon thought he was far enough from the fox for any surprise attack to fail, so he addressed her coldly.

"I know that foxes are the most shameless animals in the whole forest, but I couldn't ... I simply couldn't imagine that any of them would be such a liar! Three members of my family were

the victims of your ruses. Do you understand this, my 'friend'?!... Not only that—I don't believe you, no matter what you tell me, but I want you to know that, as far as I'm concerned, of all the creatures that creep on this earth, you are the one worthiest of disdain!"

The fox realized with horror that all she said and even all she could say to this determined bird had no value. The pigeon took off and, without even thinking for one moment whether this made sense, she began to shout with all her strength, "Don't leave, pigeon! Don't leave! Don't leave! Don't..." These desperate words were all she had time to utter, before the cough cut her cry. The crisis was so strong that it stuck her to the ground and stiffened her limbs so violently that they began to hurt. For a long time all she could do was cough. This time she almost choked. But when she recovered and was able to open her eyes, amazement made her draw back.... Before her, on the ground and only a few steps away, the pigeon who had so bitterly defied her a little while ago was sitting, looking very carefully at her.

*

"Maybe the foxes are extremely crafty, but of one thing I'm sure..." said he mildly. "No animal could imitate such a cough! Now I believe that you are very ill ... but I don't understand at all how a friend of a different species could help you. In fact, I don't understand at all what a friendship between two animals so different as we are could mean!"

"I don't understand that very well myself..." the poor fox said with difficulty. "It seems that it is The Great Spirit's desire that a creature who makes so many mistakes as I do should not survive this serious sickness, unless she manages to gain the confidence and the affection of an animal who, under most normal circumstances, would certainly be her victim."

"Why are you saying that this is the desire of The Great Spirit?" asked the pigeon with great interest.

"It isn't me who says it, in fact..." answered the fox tensely, "but the wise deer. He showed to me what cure I had to follow to get well, but he added that it will have no effect unless I also manage to fulfill the strange desire of The Great Spirit."

"This looks, indeed, like the unusual recipes of the good deer..." said the bird, thoughtful. "Everybody looks at them as if they were something strange, but the only thing that matters is that there has never been one that, if the patient followed it seriously, was mistaken. It seems that even without knowing very well what a friendship between two animals like us might mean, there is one thing we can do...."

"Tell me, pigeon.... Which thing? Which would that thing be?" babbled the fox, very excited.

“Precisely this thing that happened today,” said the pigeon calmly. “We managed to talk to each other ... and, it seems, not without a certain understanding. Do you know something? Show me the place where your home is and I will come every day, at noon, to visit you and speak with you a little.”

“Oh, I can’t ask you to do more than that, my good pigeon!” said the fox, full of enthusiasm. “All I can offer to such a noble animal as you is my gratitude!” And after a few moments, she added in a more moderate tone, “I won’t say anything else yet, for I’m ashamed of the nature of my kind, and I’m afraid you will doubt my words again.”

*

In a short time, the mysterious workings of fate made the unexpected relationship between the fox and the pigeon much greater than either of them had expected. The different stories each of them told the other made them both dream about ways of living and feeling that fascinated both of them, but the discovery of their common feelings – the desire for knowledge, the worries and joys related to their dear ones, the fear of sickness and death – made them feel as close to one another as if they were really tied through the blood of the same family.

*

At one of their meetings, the fox noticed a marten who was looking out for the pigeon when he was preparing to land in front of her lair. Because she didn’t have time to warn him, the fox jumped courageously in front of the predator and managed to scare him so badly that he drew back immediately. The fox kept running after him for a while, and after she came back to her friend, she insisted that he should stay only two steps in front of her during their meetings, and not get down on the ground until receiving from her a short signal that the area was safe. The pigeon hadn’t dared until then to stay so close to the fox, but after this affair, he accepted happily and with confidence the protection he was being offered.

Lately, the fox, who had made a steady habit of consuming the healing stalks, didn’t look at them anymore like a disgusting medicine ... but rather, they were like some pleasant spice, without which her food would lose a lot of its flavor. On the one hand this habit, and on the other her closer and closer friendship with the pigeon, made her feel so well that there were days when she completely forgot about her sickness, and thus, she lost the sense of why she had come to this forest. The autumn passed by without her feeling it, and after the first snow, the fox was still looking for the green stalks, which she could find under the thin layer of snow. She thought of her family every once in a while and planned to go back home as soon as possible, without realizing

that only her relationship with her wonderful winged friend made her always postpone her departure.

*

One of the days at the beginning of winter, in the first light of the dawn, the pigeon appeared in the way of his friend who had just left her den. He sat right in front of her, without waiting for any sign of warning, with a demeanor full of agitation, which surprised the fox.

“Humans!” said the pigeon, excited. “There are humans with guns and dogs in the forest!... I think in a short time they will get to the den... You must do something -- you must disappear from here as soon as possible!”

The fox was scared, but her cunning mind worked as fast as usual. “Tell me where they are coming from toward us, my friend.”

*

The two dogs of the hunters took the smell of the fox from the lair and headed immediately on the fresh traces that she had left on the snow a little while ago. But at the brook at the forest’s edge, the smell and the traces got completely lost. The humans led the dogs on both banks, but their attempt was useless. After half an hour of searching, they all came back into the forest nervous, and until the middle of the day, most of the forest creatures lived in a great terror, which was repeatedly reinforced by gunshots and furious barks.

*

A long time after the hunters had gone, the forest remained in its horror-stricken silence. Suddenly, the merry babble of a bird unraveled the oppressive veil of silence. The pigeon landed on the knob of a big cut tree, whose uncovered root was half suspended above the brook. Under it, the bank took the shape of a small round cave, which was visible from the other bank.

But the fox was not there; she was in the dry trunk, which was half-empty inside. She didn’t know which of the forest animals had built such an ingenious hiding place, but when new and amazing things were discovered on one side of the forest and the humans hadn’t recently passed by, the most common opinion was that they were always the work of the intelligent rats.

“Very strange,” pondered the fox. Was it an accident that her survival in this difficult trial of her destiny was due to some beings that were often a prey of hers?

“Get out, my dear friend!” shouted the pigeon from above. “The humans have been gone from the forest for a long time. I saw them entering the village after the big fields ... and I don’t think they will be back soon!”

*

Such adventures -- and many others less important -- tied the two friends so strongly that they soon came to look for each other every day ... and often many times a day. However, these unexplainable and repeated absences of the pigeon began to disturb his wife more and more. They had been together for only a few months, and the fact that he was keeping secrets in such an unexpected way was something that a female pigeon who was in love could not tolerate easily.

One day, the pigeon came back to her long after dark. Not only the negligence he thus showed toward her, but also the lack of elementary caution for his species made the mild and patient female pigeon burst out bluntly, “You’ve pushed me too far this time! I’ve waited enough without a word, fearing I might upset you.... If you have an explanation, give it to me as soon as possible, for otherwise...” the female pigeon took a deep breath and then uttered quickly and with no expression, as if she were declaiming mechanically, “otherwise, you may be sure that the first time you leave again, I will also go someplace ... someplace so far that you will never find me!”

It’s true that it wasn’t hard for the pigeon to understand his companion’s frustration. In all this time since he had struck up his friendship with the fox, he had often been surprised by his mate’s tact and patience. He shouldn’t have been a coward and let things go so far.

He drew near the female pigeon gently and began to tell her leisurely the whole story of his friendship with the fox. He began shyly and prudently, with long breaks, because with every new thought he tried to look at things from the perspective of the female pigeon, so that nothing would scare her or estrange her from him even more. But as he was telling his story, the memories became more and more lively, so he started to speak faster and louder. He soon became so enthusiastic that he interrupted his sentences, jumped from one idea to the other with no connection, got angry and then laughed in the next moment. When he got to the end of the adventures he had lived that day, he was tired and had a hoarse voice, but his eyes were shining with satisfaction. He remembered the female pigeon only then and looked at her with hope. The answer came right away.

“I’ve listened to you carefully, pigeon, and I realize that, since you are so stupid to risk your life for one of the greatest enemies of our kind, probably nothing I could say will convince you! This is why I’ll not try to bring other arguments now. Understand just one thing! You must

decide between the fox and me! I will wait till tomorrow morning, to give you enough time to make up your mind.”

After this affair, the fox and the pigeon saw each other once more, and then didn't meet at all for a long time.

*

Although she understood her friend, the fox felt, of course, betrayed. Maybe the fact that she hadn't managed to keep her relationship with the pigeon was her fault ... or maybe not ... but for The Great Spirit this surely was the same. From now on, she expected her sickness to come back at any moment. This had been the only reason why she hadn't yet left this forest, which had become almost unbearable to her, because everything in it reminded her of her wonderful friend. She wasn't looking for the bewitched stalks anymore, nor for the company of another animal. She got out of the lair only during the night, when she hunted something, only as much as she needed to stay alive. During the day, she didn't leave the lair at all.

*

One night she didn't even bother to go out to hunt. She was so disgusted with the life she was leading that not even hunger managed to move her. How well it would be if she could only sleep ... sleep and dream endlessly, and never be compelled to wake up!

However, in the morning she woke up suddenly, and not so much because of hunger as because of a maddening thirst. She wasn't prepared to bear such discomfort, so she rushed to the brook with all her speed. But things didn't work out the way she expected this time either, because, due to dizziness, she went the wrong way, although she knew the right path even with her eyes closed, under normal circumstances. And not only did she go the wrong way, but she didn't even realize it until she got about one hundred steps away from the den, into a glade in the middle of the forest. A falcon passed by not far from her head, and her eye was drawn to his flight. When he then rose suddenly above the bushes and the trees around, the fox jerked violently, as if awakened from her sleep.

She remained in her place, stunned, and before thinking to change her direction, she heard the noise of a violent wing beat and noticed, only a few steps to her right, the falcon turning around in a spiral, around a pigeon who had managed to avoid several times the iron beak of the enemy. But at a certain moment, she was hit by one of his strong wings and, not having enough strength to recover, fell down to the earth. One moment later, the fox made a huge jump and, taking advantage of the falcon's confusion, sat down, covering the pigeon. This one struggled a

little, but being so exhausted and frightened, resigned herself quickly and decided to wait peacefully for the end.

Frightened, the falcon rose high into the air, but not so far as to not be able to discern the move of a second pigeon, who was heading like crazy toward the fox, who was still keeping her prey stuck to the ground.

“The mate of the first pigeon, probably...” the falcon told himself immediately, for he had seen such things before and, in a strange way, he couldn’t refrain from admiring the devotion and sacrifice of these frail birds.... But this didn’t mean, of course, that he was ever in the mood for not taking advantage of such imprudences.

When he finally managed to notice the falcon, the pigeon realized immediately that he had no chance to escape, in that large and open glade. Maybe there was one more chance ... if he called his mate ... but, considering the price of this call, he would rather choose to die. He sat down in the short grass and closed his eyes. This time it wasn’t that imitation of death which he had so many times practiced together with his best friend. It was too late now for any kind of protection. A strong noise of quick steps and wings -- then the short, but very sharp whistle of the falcon made the fox forget his prisoner and rapidly get up from the ground.

Now, both pigeons were waiting horror-stricken, with their eyes closed. None of them understood anything of what they heard before. Suddenly, the glade resounded with the deer’s deep voice.

“Hey, in all this glade there’s no animal courageous enough to say a welcome word to an old friend?”

*

The fox rushed to the deer, and the white pigeon who had been immobilized by her immediately flew, frightened, into an old tree nearby.

“Don’t run, my beloved female pigeon!” cried the pigeon who had remained in the grass. “The fox who caught you before is my very friend!... She did that only to protect you from the attack of our enemy.”

“It’s true!” confirmed the big deer with a thundering voice. He had stopped right next to the pigeon. “I did nothing more just now than to defend a friend, but this fox did something much more important! She defended an animal only because it is of the same kind as her friend ... I’m telling you that such an attachment between two animals who are so different is very rare in a forest!”

The female pigeon couldn't breathe anymore. In a flash she realized how much she had been mistaken when she had forced her husband to give up his friendship with this special animal, who had now saved her life. She got down with no hesitation into the grass of the glade and addressed the fox, full of humility.

"If you can, please, forgive me ... I didn't believe there were such noble creatures in the forest. I realize how much I made you suffer ... In fact, I made you both suffer. But now, because your great goodness made you protect me as if I were your sister, I dare to say I wish nothing more than for you to accept my gratitude and friendship."

The deer looked at the fox with interest.

"I can't believe what's happening here!" said she with a thrill in her voice. "Last night I wished I would never wake up and now ... now ... I don't know what to believe. This means I will not die very soon of that ugly sickness, my precious deer?"

"The female pigeon just offered you her friendship," said the deer, smiling. "You'd better give her an answer, and not torture your soul with problems that have been solved for a long time. The friendship between you and the pigeon was and is a real thing – you feel that very well in your heart. But don't you also feel that real things can never perish?"

*

If anyone else except the deer had spoken the words above, the fox would surely have found in them enough reasons to doubt. But every word spoken by this wise animal of the forest had the gift of brightening and warming her from the inside, as if it were a little sun.

She looked at the deer thoughtfully, then turned her head toward the delicate female pigeon and told her tenderly, "Believe me, I don't wish for anything more in these moments than to be your friend ... for all of us to be friends, forever."

THE BADGER

When the badger was very little, he used to play the whole day with the animal cubs around the lair. The little foxes, the little marten, the otters on the lake shore, they all came to play with the little badger, who was so joyful and so good in any circumstance, that discord had no chance in their small group of friends. Even when it was cold, windy, and raining outside, the friends met every day, after breakfast, at the badger family's den. In a way that nobody could explain, around this small innocent there always seemed to be light and warmth.

Of course, everybody spoiled him.... In those times, he never had to worry about getting food. Even when his parents came back home late into the night, tired and disappointed after having hunted, their cub was sleeping with his belly full ... for there was no gathering to which one of his good friends didn't bring something appetizing to eat from his family's meal, saved especially for the badger.. The little badger ate as much as he could and then, if something was left, kept it aside for later on. He had never kept food for his parents. Since they were big, strong and never complained, the cub never realized that, as opposed to him, they only rarely managed to eat enough.

*

The badger was four and a half months old when his life changed in only one night. It was toward the end of autumn, and a fine and thick rain had been falling for about two days over the whole vicinity. The animals were not very worried, because none of them remembered the autumn rains ever bringing big damages to the forest creatures. All of them were much more afraid of the unexpected storms of the spring and of the torrential waterfalls in the first part of the summer.

Nevertheless, in that dark and misty night of late autumn, the brook was strangled by two old trees next to the big glade. The trees had fallen across the river from both banks. In a short time, the brook flooded like a fury of nature and fell in an unstoppable breakthrough over the edge of the forest where the badgers' den was situated. The badger parents were both awakened by the nearby whirr of the waters and, in one moment, rushed out through different exits, to the base of the hill where they had built their shelter. The mother was the first to see the torrential waterfall, and cried urgently to her mate, commanding him to climb back to the lair. But neither of them

managed to go back, because the breakthrough, much more rapid, caught them and took them with it down to the valley. The badger cub, who was sleeping profoundly, woke up only the next morning. He wasn't even too worried when he noticed that his parents were missing from the den, because it had happened many times that they would leave for food before he opened his eyes. But there was a strange, penetrating smell in the air, somewhat different from that of wet leaves, to which he had become accustomed in the last days. The little badger put his head carefully out of the den and was truly amazed when he noticed that the landscape around his home was very hard to recognize. All around the den, a thick mud mixed with stones, sand, dry leaves, branches, and even younger trees covered the earth up to the entrance. The trees from the valley were also covered with mud up to the half of their trunks. The little badger tried to walk a little on the slippery, irregular surface, but as his paws seemed to sink deeper and deeper, as they would in a real marsh, he got scared and came back to the lair with a couple of jumps. Unfortunately, he didn't feel better inside. He tried to call somebody, but he noticed, horror-stricken, that he couldn't utter the faintest sound. Suddenly, he got hungry and looked feverishly for some scraps in the corners of the lair. He didn't find anything, but he didn't give up, and kept looking under the mattress of moss and leaves that his parents had already prepared for the winter. He discovered there several dry berries. He swallowed them, shivering, then tried again to cry. His voice was quite weak at the beginning, but the joy that he wasn't mute gave him more strength and, after straining a little, he managed to call his parents, and then his friends, with strong peeps. Still, nobody answered.

Late into the night, after many hours of painful waiting, the badger cub realized all of a sudden that his powers had left him. He wasn't able to think of anything. He closed his eyes and let himself fall like a log onto the floor of the lair. He felt no fear, nor pain, nor longing for his parents, nor even hopelessness. He was just very tired. And very, very hungry....

*

One year later, the badger was considered the wealthiest animal in the forest. He was conscious of that, and nothing brought him more pleasure than to explain to his "fans" how great must an individual's efforts be if he wants to succeed in life, but also how satisfying their fruits would prove to be, with time.

Nevertheless, the female badger, his mate, considered him to be greatly naïf. He really believed that through his teachings he would gain more love and consideration from those who were close to him – in addition to the admiration he was fully convinced he had already gained from any animal with a sound mind. But why was he important, in fact, to the others? Why did his

biggest struggles and contents and joys matter to all these envious strangers who listened to him, led only by the compulsion of their own greedy needs? To them, all that mattered was the recipe, the secret ... the formula of the success which was received, as far as possible, without offering anything in exchange ... nothing was required from themselves, only the cheap mask of a respectful admiration, which granted them the benevolent company of the badger. The female badger also saw that these supposed friends of her husband changed all the time ... because not having a real interest in the person or the achievements of the badger, they got bored soon and ran to find their luck someplace else. This change was almost always accompanied by attacks and irony of the most vulgar kind against the badger, who appeared in the gossip of his previous friends either as a fool who had succeeded because he enjoyed wonderful opportunities, or as a terrible, heartless individual, who had trampled over anything and anyone in order to fulfill his obsession with being the richest animal of the forest. Unfortunately, the fact that none of his many childhood friends showed any interest in keeping their relationship with the badger seemed to support this last idea better than anything else.

*

Not long ago, the female badger had been truly bewitched by the seriousness, determination, and especially the inexhaustible energy of the badger. Although he was a very young animal, he had already built three dens, started to work on the fourth, and seemed very determined not to stop here. He always had enough food, and invited her ten times a day to feast upon the most tasty and fresh food. When she refused, he disappeared abruptly and came back in a short time with an unexpected delicacy. He was incredible! No animal could get such good food so rapidly. None could equal him in mildness and generosity....

Until she had met the badger, the young female badger, who had been alone for a couple of weeks, always dreamed that she was going back to her parents. She imagined this happy meeting in great detail, although in reality she kept getting farther from their den, because she knew that her parents would be disappointed if she came back before finding her way in life.

The appearance of the good badger had the power to absorb all these thoughts and plans for the future. She felt free and, at the same time, very protected next to this strong and good animal. She understood now that her parents were right when they banished her from the den – they knew that the happiness of establishing a new family fully justified this temporary separation.

Of course, the female badger stopped looking for food by herself. After they woke up, the two friends ate something of the reserves deposited in the lair, then left together “for business,” as

the badger said. He either worked on the fourth lair, or changed something in the arrangements of the existing ones, or hunted some small animal, or gathered some berries: the badger always had something very urgent and important to do. And since in all this business he seemed to be more skillful and more rapid than the female badger, she discovered every time that she couldn't be of much help to him. So, after several unsure attempts, she gave up the endeavor and was happy to look at him with admiration – a thing that the badger seemed not to take into account at all. Nevertheless, the female badger got bored at a certain point and, when the badger rested a little, she took advantage and tried to talk to him a little. She had a very lively imagination, maybe because her mother always used to tell stories to her cubs before going to bed. To the female badger, all animals, all herbs, and all affairs happening in the forest were very interesting matters, and this was why she often felt the need to share her experiences -- and especially her impressions -- with somebody. But she couldn't find a good partner for discussion in the badger hardly at all ... he really didn't seem to have interests except those that the female badger had discovered in him the very first day when she met him.

The female badger thought more and more often, with bitterness, of the few matters that her husband was interested in. None of these was really something important, from her point of view. This judgment seemed valid because, on each occasion, she forgot to count among them the one that was the most important from the badger's point of view ... that which was, by accident, herself.

Nevertheless, fate hadn't given to the badger a life without surprises next to his female badger. His great surprises appeared after their first cubs had been born, and she began to change in a way he couldn't understand at all.

Instead of being much happier now that their family had been enriched with three cute and healthy creatures, the female badger was always sadder and more silent. It was true that the badger was missing a lot from home, but his efforts now had to cover the needs of everybody in the family. But he worked with a frenzy and joy which he had previously experienced only in the first months he had spent together with his female badger. When he came back home, no matter how tired he was, he always had time to play a little with his cubs, if he found them still awake. Then he delicately drew close to his mate and clung to her fur, but she didn't seem too enthusiastic about this anymore. The badger knew very well that she liked to talk, so he always asked her how she had spent her day and what else had happened with the little ones. If she were in a good mood, she would begin to tell him with many details the new, funny, and unexpected things that their cubs had done. However, she never got to finish her stories, because the badger,

tired as he was, fell asleep in less than a quarter of an hour, lulled by the pleasant melody of her voice.

But if she happened to be morose – and this happened more and more often as time went by – the female badger threw him only a monosyllabic answer, after which, with the same frozen voice, she would ask him how he had spent his day. The badger might have had something to tell, but he felt too exhausted to think about what had happened since they had last seen each other. He made a tremendous effort to summarize, in only one sentence, everything he had done, the animals he had met, and the places he had gone in the meantime. Then he fell silent and concentrated, endeavoring with his last strength to remember whether he had forgotten something important, something to make his wife happy or to surprise her, but usually, if she didn't ask him anything else, he fell asleep before speaking one more word.

*

After two months, the female badger didn't ask him anything when he came back home. She didn't like to talk about the little ones, either. The badger tried to fill the gaps in their conversation with all kinds of jokes and inspired words, but nothing of what he said seemed to interest his companion. Instead, the little badgers had grown up and had become attentive to his stories; now they played a little less, but began to speak with each other more and more. Fortunately, the three little ones never got bored with listening to him ... nor did they get upset if he fell asleep during these discussions. They chuckled and imitated him by turns, for they found him very funny when he fell asleep unexpectedly, but they never got angry.

One evening, the badger came back home after a day of work to a new den, and found his home empty. Terribly frightened, he looked for his family all over the place and asked all the neighbors. Nobody had seen them leaving the den. Dismay overcame him like a cold wave. His sight blurred suddenly and, choking, he leaned with his back against a young tree, which bent a great deal under the pressure of his weight. In the next moments, he discerned a nearby noise of broken branches and, before he was able to make another move, he found himself hit in the back by a hard body. He turned around rapidly and found himself in front of a scruffy marten. He understood right away what had happened, and hurried to ask the marten to excuse him for his lack of attention. But the marten had a morose character and threw him a baleful glance, after which he got farther away, walking backwards and babbling between his teeth, "These fumblers... they don't find their place in the forest anymore.... These fumblers ... they break everything around them!"

The badger looked at him, surprised and, unexpectedly, rushed to follow him. “Why are you saying we don’t find our place in the forest anymore?... Who are we, the ones who don’t find our place?”

The marten hesitated a little, for this animal was much stronger than himself, and if a confrontation took place, he could escape only by running away. “You, the badgers!” said he, trying hard to maintain his revolted attitude. “A little earlier, an entire family cut my path while I was running after a squirrel kit.... Another failed hunt for today!...What do you care?!”

The badger was breathing hard. “Was it a female badger with three cubs, the family you are talking about?”

“How did you know?” exclaimed the marten, surprised. “It is exactly as you are saying. Had they not been so many, maybe I would have managed not to lose track of my prey!”

“Where did they go?” asked the poor badger, full of hope.

“When I got up in the tree to look after my prey, I saw them heading toward the spring.”

*

The female badger was just entering the den next to the spring, when her husband caught her on the way. As if everything had been established beforehand, the badger didn’t say anything and entered with natural movements, after her, into the nest. The cubs, who were already inside, were very happy to see their father. The female badger was also silent, but deep inside herself, she was very excited. She realized only now how much she had hoped that her good badger would come after them.... Indeed, things were not as bad as they had seemed to be. Probably all she was asked to do in exchange for a happy life next to her husband was to have a little more patience.

*

Unfortunately, in a short time, the female badger’s business got complicated in an unexpected way. Now she appeared to be full of patience and understanding for her husband, but instead, he was becoming harder and harder to satisfy. The cubs were bigger and they all began to get out from time to time looking for food, and every such expedition was an occasion of great irritation for the badger. None of the little ones managed to respect the advice of their father ... and he advised them all the time and criticized them for their lack of attention and for their laziness. Too slow, and lacking interest ... this was the way all the members of his family were to badger ... and he couldn’t refrain from repeating every day that had he been like them after the disaster in his childhood when he lost his parents, he would certainly have died of hunger.

Several weeks later, when he came back home, the badger discovered that his family had left again, without telling him anything. This time he didn't get scared, nor did he fret, but left in a hurry to search his other dens. And he was not mistaken, because the female badger had chosen this time an older den of his, where they hadn't stayed at all so far, because it seemed too small to the badger and too inelegant for a wealthy family like his. There was only one entry to this lair and it was in a pit, under the dry root of a tree trunk which had been fallen for a long time.

The badger tried to get in, but he didn't have time to enter because he heard from inside the heavy growling of the female badger. Surprised, he stopped and said, "What's going on with you? Don't you recognize me? Don't you want to speak with me?"

After a few moments of silence, the female badger answered him with a determined voice. "I recognized you very well.... But I don't want you to come in here. And I don't want to live with you anymore!"

A thrill of fear shook the badger. "Children..." he babbled, lamenting, "children, I want to be with you. Come out to talk to me for a little while...." He didn't hear so much as a rustle from the den. "Children, please ... don't leave me alone!"

The three cubs began to stir about, tearful, but their mother gave them a sign to wait a little. The badger was even more hurt than they were by his entreaties. Did he deserve such a lack of gratitude, such cruelty? After all he had done for them ... after he had worked only for them and had taken care of them like no other father badger!

"Do you want to be like her?!" shouted the badger suddenly, with all his strength. "It's better to waste your time all day long than to work, is it? It was bad, as long as the fool worked for you, and now you have decided you will get along much better without him ... haven't you? Stumblers, this is what you are! You will come back to me in a couple of days, with empty bellies!"

He couldn't hear anything from inside the den, again.

The badger babbled for a while, more to himself than to them, and then went back to his den terribly angry.

*

The cubs didn't come to look for him in the following days, as he expected, but he couldn't resist and soon began to bring them, during the night, something to eat. Every morning, the family discovered the food at the den's entrance, and this touched the little ones and made them decide to visit their father as soon as possible. But they didn't say anything to their mother,

fearing she might oppose their plans or even worse, might forbid them to try to get in touch with him.

One beautiful autumn day, at noon, the female badger left to look for food, while the cubs pretended to sleep deeply. Immediately after their mother got farther away, the three of them left for their father's den. They were lucky to find him at home, and the surprise of the meeting made the poor badger extremely happy. Nevertheless, although they spent an entire afternoon together and managed to get along with him very well, in the evening they bade farewell to him and, despite all his prayers and entreaties, went back to the mother badger.

*

Half a year later, in the middle of spring, the little badgers, who were now almost as big and strong as their father, left their mother's den one by one. The female badger had never felt so lonely and so unhappy ... not even in those times when she had just left her parents' home. Remembering the redeeming meeting with the badger, she felt she was beginning to cry. She hadn't heard any news about him since autumn.

Without thinking too much, she left her lair and looked for him in all the known places, one by one. None of his older four houses was empty. Other badger families, one fox family, and even a big forest snake made their beds in the lairs which the female badger knew so well. But unfortunately, the new inhabitants seemed to know nothing about the badger's fate.

Disappointed, the female badger came back home. The next night she slept badly and dreamt something very strange, toward morning.... In the dream, she was a cub again and left from home on one of the familiar paths, to look for food. At a certain moment she got quite far from the den and passing over a taller hill, got into an unknown landscape ... a deserted place, full of destroyed dens and trees that were burnt down to their roots. Already dizzy with fear, the female badger kept walking on the path, looking at every hiding place and searching for a living creature ... when suddenly, something fell down like a dry branch before her. At least it just seemed to be a branch when it touched the earth, but it immediately turned into a wide, gray shape, which agglomerated itself step by step, appearing to finally be a badger. The badger ran right away toward the nearest lair. He tried to enter it but the entrance was fallen down, so after a few hopeless attempts, he rushed toward another den. There he endured the same failure, but didn't give up, and ran toward another hiding place.

The female badger felt mercy for him and tried to attract his attention with some sharp cries, but the strange badger didn't react to them at all. He continued without hesitation in his stupid attempts. The most curious thing about this entire scene was that, as time went by, instead

of getting tired, the badger moved more and more quickly. At a certain moment, the female badger couldn't follow him anymore. Confused, she sat down on her hind paws and leaned against a nearby tree. But just then, the badger, who had finally stopped and sat down, in his turn, on his hind paws, bent ahead suddenly and rushed, with incredible speed, precisely to the place where she was. The female badger didn't have time to get away.

She woke up tired and scared, with a terrible tension in the muscles of her legs.

*

During the day, she did nothing more than make a useless circuit of a few hundred steps around the den. She was so anxious and in such a bad mood that she didn't touch any food.

In the evening, when fatigue caught her entire body as if in a strong wind, she finally decided to go to bed. But she didn't have time to get into the lair before something like a gray shadow passed nearby, hardly perceptible to her sight. The female badger unwillingly took a few steps, as if she were hypnotized, into the path of that indefinite shape, then suddenly stopped, as if she were frozen.

It was he! The badger had stopped at the edge of a high elevation and was digging very rapidly under a thick layer of moss. He stopped unexpectedly and ran with a couple of jumps toward a thick peanut bush.

The female badger couldn't believe it. She had an unclear feeling that she had already lived through all these moments, but couldn't afford to waste too much time with these reflections, and rushed to follow the badger. He was still in the middle of the bush, frantically looking for the hard fruits with their tasty cores. He stayed with his back to her, so the female badger called him by that pet name which only she and their cubs knew. The badger jerked violently and turned around rapidly. He had a scared and confused expression, but the female badger was sure, after his first reaction, that he had recognized her immediately.

"What are you looking for here?" asked the badger with a faltering voice.

"What are you looking for?" replied the female badger, determined. "I am in the area of my lair."

"Oh, yes..." babbled the badger, as if he had been awakened from sleep. "Your lair ... I remember it ... I remember all the lairs very well ... but I don't like them anymore! I got tired of building dens. It's a big waste of time! I have my own hiding places now ... this is what I've been busy with lately.... You know, I like very much to discover new hiding places...."

The female badger looked at him carefully and noticed he had gotten very thin. His fur was dirty, knotted in many places with burs, and stained with hardened mud. On his snout she could see very clearly several quite recent scars, which made the female badger think immediately that the so-called new hiding places had also been discovered by others before him.

Although they were only a few steps away from the den, the female badger asked her ex-husband if he could show her one of his homes. Delighted, he started to go before her with proud steps and led her on the shortest way toward a ravine that was on a naked edge of the forest. After one of the last trees that rose on the ravine's edge, the badger stopped and raised his eyes toward her. The female badger was stunned. She couldn't see a shelter anywhere in this naked landscape; in fact, she had rarely seen a more exposed place, from any living creature's perspective!

"What do you think?" asked the badger eagerly.

"I think it is a hiding place so good that I am not capable of discovering it..." she answered, confused.

"I knew this was what was going to happen!" laughed the badger happily. "My hiding places are as visible as possible ... this is why they are so great! Nobody would suspect that someone could hide in them!"

"But ... where do you live?" asked the female badger, more and more apprehensive.

"Here.... Precisely here where we are now. I have chosen this place because the grass is thicker and softer ... but who knows?... If I come to like another place better tomorrow, I can move without any problem ... I know very well that The Great Spirit is protecting me, and nothing bad can happen!"

The female badger was left speechless. Could she be the only one guilty of all that had happened?

She turned her head so that he wouldn't see her tears, and addressed him in a determined, almost abrupt tone. "It's late now, and I am very tired. May I sleep in this very special hiding place of yours?"

The badger seemed to be very thoughtful, then, unexpectedly, jumped aside and began to very rapidly gather grass, thin branches, and leaves from the vicinity, which he then put very skillfully around the female badger. Before she could realize what was happening, she found herself in a kind of round, tall nest, very well-sheltered on one side. After he smoothed the upper part of the structure a little, the badger made a little break into the wall, but instead of entering on that side, as the female badger had expected, he made a heroic jump over the nest's edge and landed inside on all four feet, right in front of her.

They looked into each other's eyes surprised for a moment, after which they burst into laughter. But the badger stopped quickly, sighed, and breathed. Nevertheless, he didn't manage to say anything to the female badger. He turned his back toward her and they remained silent for a long time, watching each other's breathing. Later on, the badger, who had sighed ten times in the meanwhile, gained the courage to whisper to her, without changing his position at all, "I don't want to get you upset.... Sooner or later, you will probably get angry with me again, and you will leave."

For a few moments he waited for an answer with emotion, then said a little louder, "I know I am too stupid for you, and that's why you couldn't be happy with me and left..."

He perked up again toward the female badger, but didn't get an answer this time either, only a slight snore, a sign that the fatigue had managed to get her down. The badger sighed once more, with so much grief, as if he wanted to free himself from the worries of a lifetime; then he let himself fall softly on one side and fell asleep. But the female badger opened her eyes and smiled mysteriously, looking at the starry sky of the night. She was thankful to The Great Spirit because he protected her poor unhappy husband with so much care. A warmth full of tenderness suddenly spread from her heart and grew from there like an unstoppable wave in her chest, then in her entire body. She couldn't think of anything anymore. She was finally happy.

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Other seasons passed through the forest. The cubs were old enough now to be able to feed themselves, but their parents didn't show the smallest sign that they intended to allow them, from time to time, to get along by themselves. For the first time, the female badger made the decision to take them with her on a longer trip, and the two little badgers were excited to discover the surprises that this special event had for them. Their parents had been planning it in great secrecy, for several weeks.

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Once they arrived in the glade at the ravine's edge, they saw their father, who kept pushing a big bunch of grass and dry leaves. The mother sat down to look at him and waved to the two cubs to sit down for a while. She seemed extremely content, but the little badgers were really disgusted. So this was the great adventure of that day! To make bunches of grass! Of course their parents wouldn't believe them at all capable of something better than that!

The two threw a short glance to each other, then started, disappointed, shoulder to shoulder, on the way back home. However, they didn't have time to take more than thirty steps before the female badger caught up with them.

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Late into the night, the mild rays of the moon disclosed, in the meadow between the ravine and the forest's edge, four nests close to each other, built of grass and dry leaves. One of them was distinguished by its width and by the thickness of its walls, but was completely empty, just like two others. But the smallest of these nests sheltered an entire badger family. The four slept quietly outdoors, under the sky, cuddled with each other, as if they were in a real den.

THE NIGHTINGALE

In the small family of the nightingales the fullest understanding and harmony prevailed. They could be an example to be followed by any of the forest animals. At least, this was what all the birds who knew the nightingales thought. As far as the nightingale mother was concerned, she couldn't deny the great benevolence with which The Great Spirit had thus far interwoven the threads of her life. She couldn't wish for a better mate or for more obedient chicks. Together with her Ulu, as she called her husband, who had been the greatest singer of the forest when they had met, they took care of their offspring with great devotion. They fed them with insects and ant eggs; they looked out for them by taking turns; they filled their evenings with stories; and they taught them, little by little, all the important lessons of forest life. They were among the very few parents whose chicks all survived beyond their first childhood. Not even the familiarization with flight had been a too difficult test for these attentive and scrupulous chicks.

One of the four chicks, who was frailer and dared to fly a little later, had been helped not only by his parents but also by his two other brothers. Thus, he managed to recuperate very rapidly and became impassioned of the wonderful art of acrobatic flight. When the owl, the famous forest teacher, saw at a certain moment this small flyer making his daring exercises out of pure pleasure, without needing any spectator, the owl decided to speak with his parents. This explained the fact that only one week later, all four chicks of the nightingale family were registered with honors in the owl's school. Once again, the whole family enjoyed together this unexpected and extraordinary act of benevolence of The Great Spirit. The nightingale mother remembered that the old deer had once told her that wise parents have wise children. This was probably the key to all the successes with which they had been blessed, and it made no sense for them to be so amazed anymore.

But from the very first school days of the chicks, Ulu, the nightingale mother's husband, discovered the unbearable taste of boredom. The chicks were missing from home the entire morning and he didn't know how to fill all that time. In contrast, his wife seemed still to be very content with her life. During the morning she went to look for food, talked leisurely with one or another of her older friends, and these hours passed by still too fast for her. Ulu, instead, felt he must find an occupation. Before getting married, this problem hadn't troubled his mind and soul at all. He was the greatest singer of the forest! After two songs of his, most of the birds and even a

good part of the animals in the forest, especially the younger ones, stopped all their activities, as if touched by a spell.

But why hadn't he sung for such a long time?

Of course, he and his wife had been very busy with the chicks. He could hardly find time to waste with the concerts in the forest. Nevertheless ... why didn't he sing at all to his chicks, and why didn't he sing to his wife?

Ulu realized with amazement that after he had made a nest with his wife, he never again had that feeling from the spring when he had been in love with her. He realized very clearly that it was not the interest which the other animals took in his wonderful singing that made him sing. When the pleasant chill of the evening fell over the forest and its noises began to fade away, after a day in which he had looked for food, met known birds, and helped his parents, but during which, in fact, he thought of his sweetheart all the time, his soul was so full that he had the feeling it would break into innumerable painful pieces. An invincible need rose suddenly in his heart, and then he opened his beak and the singing began to flow out.

The first sounds surprised even himself, every time. They were always, always different. And if when he began to sing, the forest was still busy with the very different rhythms of its creatures' lives, once his first notes were heard, the deepest peace and silence came to reign in it. All the harmonious sounds of the birds, the murmur of all springs and the sigh of all the beings touched by the magic wing of love and longing were going to blend, after an unknown and infallible science, in the symphony full of force and tenderness that followed. In it, the singer and his song seemed to become only one life. This was why few of those who were near him managed to realize exactly where he was when he was singing. His voice seemed to come from everywhere, but at the same time, from nowhere.

The little bird with his gray coat sang like this many hours in a row, without any trace of fatigue. When his desired mate drew near and was caught in that unique spell of his being, the inner flow quieted down rapidly, like the water of a lake. This was, finally, happiness! And the singing was the path that always stopped at its gates.

Ulu hadn't forgotten how to sing; he was as sure of that as possible. But he lacked in all this time that tension of soul which had to turn into singing. Maybe he had been too quiet, too scrupulous, too content with his simple life as husband and father. While he was thinking this way, Ulu got a little scared of his thoughts. He knew from his parents that there's a right time for everything! So it was natural for everything to happen this way, and all he had done so far was well done. He tried uselessly to think of something else for several moments.... But did this mean that he would never sing again?!

In one of these boring mornings, Ulu woke up remembering the happiness he had once enjoyed. Unfortunately, this happiness began to hurt him now, like a thorn piercing his chest. He couldn't say anything about this to his wife. He remained morose and silent all day, and the next morning he left together with his four children to the owl's school, without speaking a word to his wife. The nightingale mother was so shocked by this impolite behavior of her beloved husband that she wasn't even able to protest.

When they all got to the school, Ulu went directly to the owl and addressed him shyly. "Dear Mr. Professor, I am disturbing you with a proposal which is very important to me...."

"I'm listening to you, of course," said the owl, in his always determined tone.

:You know I sing ... I mean, I used to sing until not long ago, Mr. Professor. I used to be appreciated, I think ... which means I'm quite good at it. So, I've been thinking it would be interesting to teach the youth in your remarkable school this wonderful art of singing."

The owl's eyes had a strange glitter, as if he had before him a creature from another planet. "You are a nightingale, aren't you?" he asked in a dry tone.

"Of course..." answered Ulu shyly.

"So you who are a nightingale think that other birds that are not nightingales will be capable of learning your singing, which is so difficult and special?"

"Why not?" dared Ulu. "In your school they learn things which they cannot learn in their families."

"Are you doubting the credibility of the school?" the professor said, irritated. "I can't believe you don't know what an extraordinary tradition this school has, what a full recognition it has from all animals in the forest! As far as I'm concerned, I was appointed by the great professor before me, who handed down to me in many years the entire treasure of his wisdom.... Who could appoint you, sir? Who could vouch for you as a music teacher in this school?"

Ulu got even smaller under this torrent of words, pronounced with all the incomparable force and authority of the owl. "I ... in fact, I thought that the one who could vouch for me is you, Mr. Professor..." said he, with his last strength.

"I'm sorry, but this is stupid. I'm not good at singing. And I am even less good at understanding your strange music! Now excuse me; my students are waiting for me."

The small nightingale was so humiliated that he couldn't even look up. He couldn't say anything. The owl seemed to hesitate for one moment, but then turned his back on him and flew furiously toward the nearby tree, in which his disciples already made a terrible noise.

The nightingale mother got scared when she saw her poor husband heading toward home. His flight was so heavy and irregular that she was afraid somebody had hurt him mortally. He sat

down in the nest and huddled inside, with his head under a wing. Of course he didn't tell her anything.

All of a sudden, the entire resentfulness that her husband's behavior had inspired within her in the morning cleared away from the nightingale's heart as if it had never existed. She understood now clearly that something very bad was happening to her Ulu, and all she wanted was to help him, to do something for him to become again that wonderful husband and father, without whom her own life seemed to lack any importance.

"Ulu..." said she gently, but he didn't show any sign of having heard her. "Ulu..." she repeated with the same mildness, "did anything happen when you went to school with the children?"

He didn't answer this time, either.

"Did you speak with the professor about them and he told you something bad? Did one of our little ones make some mistake?"

"Don't worry about them..." she heard Ulu's bitter answer. "None of them is a problem to us. Only I, being the fool I am ... thought I could teach the owl's students how to sing."

"But this is wonderful, my dear!" gushed his wife, happy. "Why are you upset, as long as...."

"As long as, of course, the professor didn't accept me in his school! He told me he's not good at singing and there is no one to appoint me.... And, unfortunately, he is quite right, my dear! I have no experience, and I haven't even sung for a very long time. Who would recognize me as a teacher?"

The nightingale mother remained thoughtful. Ulu realized that not even she could find an answer to his problem. The frail hope, which had appeared in his heart when he confessed to her, perished with pain.

Unexpectedly, however, she turned to him and searched him attentively with her inquisitive eyes. "Ulu, do you still love me? Do you still love our chicks?"

"But why are you asking these questions, my dear?" he asked bitterly. "I have gotten to be so miserable that you don't trust me at all?"

"If you still love us, why don't you want to sing for us? Why not teach our kids how to sing? I know they will do it anyway one day for their mates. But wouldn't it be nice for them to sing even now, to be able to sing all the time?"

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When Ulu began to sing, the entire forest remained silent, as always. The owl realized immediately what was happening and tried to continue his lesson as if nothing had happened. Nevertheless, he didn't manage at all to attract any of his students' attention. He wanted to yell at them, to cover that unbearable voice, but something strange prevented him from uttering one more sound. *A spell*, he thought nervously, but a few moments later he knew very clearly that no matter what it was or from where that song came, the only thing he wanted was to listen to it.

Ulu's singing was different from all the songs of the spring, slower and less surprising than those; but it had, instead, an incomparable sweetness. He sang little, only a few trills, but the impact that this first manifestation of his art had on the forest made him completely regain his courage and self-confidence. The chicks came home earlier than usual and surrounded him enthusiastically, under their mother's satisfied glances. Their father was the greatest father in the whole forest and they all wanted to be like him, as soon as possible!

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Several weeks later, Ulu's music school had many more students than the owl's wisdom school. Even birds who by their nature never had an acknowledged talent for singing wanted very much to learn how to sing like a nightingale. Still Ulu tested everybody, and those who didn't show any aptitude for music were convinced, with great diplomacy, that their talents certainly belonged in other areas. Many of those who were refused remained Ulu's devoted admirers and asked him to hold as many concerts in the forest as possible, to also satisfy those who weren't fortunate enough to enjoy the happiness of singing by their own efforts.

This explains how, on the one hand, Ulu worked hard with his students from the music school, and on the other hand, gave concerts more and more often for his admirers from the forest.

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At the beginning he couldn't say which of the two preoccupations impassioned him more. He hadn't expected that this work of teaching the youth would be so interesting. He didn't force anybody to learn only trills of his own invention. In fact, no bird could sing these correctly if he or she were not a nightingale. Ulu was very aware of this, so he decided to improve as much as he could the singing style of each bird, and also to harmonize it with the one of other birds in the same group. For he didn't want only to create better singers in this school, but also a great chorus, in which all his students were able to sing together, in a perfect harmony, symphonies of a force and complexity never encountered in the forest.

On the other hand, every one of these different birds, with their special voices and trills, brought new teachings and inspirations to their professor. He began to practice on new melodies, and his songs changed, becoming unique. His concerts were now the greatest events of the forest, and he endeavored to prepare them with so much care and passion, that he increasingly neglected his work with the school. His wife was more and more discontent, for she had to take his place many times, and her knowledge and talent for music were too modest to assure a real evolution of the students. She could appreciate the youths' singing and correct them a little here and there, but she couldn't be an example to them at all.

From time to time, the nightingale mother sent a chick of hers to Ulu to call him to the school. He now sat down near a ravine, at the forest's edge and kept practicing, with a low voice, the last trills he had discovered. "Father! Mom and your students are waiting for you at school!" shouted the chick to him, every time.

"I'm coming right away! Let me practice a little more, the concert is near!" shouted Ulu, and sent him back in a hurry; but as far as his return was concerned, he never went back as quickly as he should.

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After all these great concerts of Ulu's took place in all the forest glades, and there was no animal in the forest who did not recognize his genius, the interest in his music began to decrease little by little. At the beginning, neither heat, nor rain, nor wind could have prevented his admirers from coming to the concert. But now, when spring came again, in the fullness of its triumph, the forest was full of all kinds of mysterious whispers and fragrances, and the disordered trills of the most different kinds of birds filled the air, from morning till late into the night. Nobody had time or inclination for his extraordinary music, it seemed ... not even his own wife.

The school established by Ulu half a year ago had been interrupted when the winter came, and until then, he didn't feel the slightest impulse to start it again. The chicks were mature now; the one who had once been the frailest of them remained for a while with his parents, but he had also begun, a few days ago, to look for a mate in one of the forests beyond the big fields of the humans.

"What else should I do now, my dear?" asked Ulu his wife, sad, at a certain moment. "You used to want me so much to sing for you ... but now I see you have become completely bored, too, by my trills!"

“Your trills?” she burst out with tears in her eyes. “If these songs lacking feeling which are only the creations of your prankish mind are really yours, you should know that I liked much more the simpler ones you used to sing before ... the ones that really came from your heart!”

Ulu looked at her, surprised. He hadn’t realized for one moment that he had been singing, for a long time, completely differently from the way he sang that day when he came back from the owl’s school, defeated; but now, when she awakened him to reality for the second time, he was overcome by a terrible feeling of uncertainty.

“I’m sorry, my little one ... I don’t think I’ll ever be able to sing like that again...” he whispered with bitterness, and hid his head under his wing.

The nightingale mother drew close to him slowly, without taking her eyes off him. There was no trace of sadness or anger in her attitude. “Do you remember that idea of yours with the chorus?” he heard her say with a merry voice. “I think we should start our music courses again!”

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The first students of the nightingales were some of those who had been refused by Ulu almost a year ago: a cuckoo, a woodpecker, and a roller. These big and strong birds, whom many of the singing birds of the forest were afraid of, listened to and respected the little musician more than his own progeny could; nevertheless, Ulu was sometimes so depressed by their lack of talent and imagination that he called his wife and asked her to spend with them at least half an hour, supervising their full-of-fervor -- but always unsuccessful -- exercises.

When Ulu was on one of these well-deserved breaks, the nightingale mother let the three disciples practice for a while their own singing habits, for relaxation. The woodpecker, who was always the most hard-working of the three, began to hit the bark of the tree in her rapid rhythm; the cuckoo began to express in a soft tone, then louder and louder, his sad, long call; and the roller accompanied them with some sharp cries, which finished with a tubby trill. By an extraordinary accident, what formed out of this juxtaposition for several moments was a harmony that left Ulu breathless.... Then everything became, just as before, a meaningless composition, a chaotic association of sounds that had no melody whatsoever.

For Ulu, however, this unexpected arrangement had been all he needed. He left the young fir where he had drawn away and came back to his students. “From now on, I fully know what we have to do!” said he in a triumphant tone, and his wife and the other three looked at him happily, because a new hope had appeared in their souls.

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At his first concert, the chorus of Ulu's students had only ten birds. Several of them were natural enemies of the others, but for a long time in this merry group of theirs there had been nothing but friends. The concert hadn't been announced to all the animals in the forest, as Ulu's great concerts once used to be announced, with a special brilliance. But at noon, all the families and all the friends of the singers were already present on the tall hill at the forest's edge. Ulu was hoping that, at least during this event, all the fears, envies, and enmities would be abolished, but his emotions were very strong. The nightingale mother accompanied the group of singers and was looking around with caution at each of the spectators.

Still, nothing bad happened during the concert.... Every time the chorus stopped for a few moments, the birds began to peep happily, but stopped as soon as the melody started again. A dozen little chicks were romping, without fear, in funny dances, above the heads of those gathered in the glade on the hill. Nevertheless, at a certain moment, Ulu discovered with surprise that his wife wasn't paying attention to the song, but was turned toward him, looking at him inquiringly. Had something gone wrong? He was in torment, fearful, without managing to answer his own question. He searched the entire assembly rapidly, to discover if there were anybody else discontented with what was happening, and all he could discover was that, although the greatest part of those who had come to the show were looking carefully at the chorus of his students, several of them were also looking at him, with the same eager expression, like the nightingale mother. Then, all of a sudden, he understood....

When the last beats of the concert were over, without leaving any break, Ulu began to sing. The chicks suddenly stopped playing, and imperceptibly went back to their parents. Ulu's trill rose from the low notes on which his students had finished their song, in shorter and shorter eddies, to that height impossible for any other bird voice, and then got down again, easily, in sways full of charm, like a tree leaf in a fall sustained by a benevolent wind.

This had been the shortest song of his life, but it included in a magic embrace all those who were gathered there; Ulu's burning heart joyfully recognized all of them as brothers and friends, equal children of The Great Spirit....

Several moments after he finished, none of those who were gathered in the glade was able to move. Then, as if they were given a sign, all began to peep and hop with enthusiasm. The members of the chorus spread to their families, but nobody left the glade before the sun disappeared beyond the tall trees at the forest's edge.

But Ulu had left as soon as he had finished singing; he headed in a hurry toward his wife and they slipped together, unseen, among the many members of the roller's family.

He was tired, but also very content.... Like all his trills from the wonderful time of his youth, but even more than those, their creation from now succeeded in being what a real song should always be: a way to happiness ... which stops at its gates.

THE OWL

Seeing the force and joy with which the young birds flew, the owl felt his entire body huddling abruptly, as if under the pressure of a big stone.

During the flight, they spoke with each other all the time; they played, joked, and sang – a life of exuberance and mutual sharing, which the owl could still remember with endless regrets.

The day before, he had thought he would be much happier, because he had finally managed to eliminate from his school the most difficult element, the most boisterous student he had met in the ten years since he became a professor. Nevertheless, he discovered now with surprise that the way he felt about his students hadn't changed at all. This didn't mean, of course, that he had come to regret in the least his decision related to the woodpecker chick. The fact that this one had the incredible cheekiness to declare him an incompetent teacher, in front of all his twenty-two classmates, could not be excused even in a life of one hundred years. How could such a shameful injustice happen to him?! To him, to whom entire generations of noble birds owed their knowledge about the most important secrets of the forest life ... to him who, maybe only with the exception of the wise deer who knew how to alleviate the wounds and sufferings of creatures of all kinds, was the best-known and the most-respected animal in the forest!

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For hundreds, maybe even for thousands of years, there was among the owls the custom that the wisest of them, who was considered to possess the entire knowledge of his species, chose at the age of senescence one of the most gifted students of his school, to whom he would hand down all the knowledge consigned to him, a long time ago, by his predecessor. This treasure of mysterious wisdom would transform the disciple into a professor.

Before this school of the owl kind existed, in such a faraway epoch that no trace of it was to be found in the stories and legends of the animals, the owls had received directly from The Great Spirit the capacity to see everywhere around them the ethereal spirits of nature. They were the last creatures on earth who could enjoy the gift of this wonderful perception, thus managing to live not only in the known world, but also in another mysterious one, inaccessible to the bodily senses. It is true that not even one animal was born without a certain capacity to recognize the signs of the weather and the evolution of the vegetation, a sort of clear memory, but limited to the

interests of his kind, of which he made use during his entire life. But the knowledge the owls gained, from their very first year of life, was much more lively, more profound and extended than this. Due to it, the owls understood like no other embodied being the growing, the breeding, the qualities and sicknesses of the animals, the ceaseless dialogue of the plants with the stones, the waters, the clouds, and the winds. Everything that went on as change of weather or seasons was known to them with precision, much earlier than to the other animals, and even some intentions and plans of the latter appeared in a perceptible form to their mysterious senses, before manifesting themselves as actions.

However, with time, the gift of perception and subtle knowledge of life was denied, gradually, even to the owls. Their spiritual senses became more and more cloudy, until they closed completely, but a part of the living and immediate knowledge from long ago still remained in their kind, crystallized in the form of teachings and stories, which every generation of parents felt it was their duty to hand down to their descendants. These teachings still had the gift of making the owls wise advisors, who could help their brothers of all kinds in many dangerous circumstances.

Nevertheless, in those times, great differences appeared between the so-called advisors, because every family got to hand down more or less of the original knowledge, more or less accurately, since not all of them were so careful and willing to help other animals or even to educate their own progeny. This is why, at a certain moment, in the discussions among the families, the idea of the school appeared. Its meaning was to preserve the teaching of the old owls as well as possible and to hand it down further, through its most gifted and dedicated students.

At the beginning there were more professors, but the conflicts that appeared quite soon between them, and which were about to lead to the disappearance of the school, determined the owls to choose only one professor, the wisest one, whom all the others were compelled to share their own knowledge with. The first professor was, consequently, recognized as the one who possessed the entire secret science of his species. The most important obligation, which he deemed to decide for himself and for all those who were going to follow him, was to mold several students who would be capable -- in case he disappeared expectedly or unexpectedly -- of taking his place. For the other disciples, considered less talented by their teacher, only a quite modest part of the great teaching of the professor was reserved. But the professor was going to teach his chosen disciples not only everything that he himself was keeping in his mind from the treasure of the past, but also how to evaluate their students in their turn, in order to then offer to each of them only that knowledge which, according to his talents and dispositions, was going to be best used to the good of all.

Nothing of what a professor deemed as being harmful or useless to a certain student could ever reach his ears. And this was possible because it had been decided that the school was to be made up of two instruction phases. In the first phase, the professor had to work with all his students at the same time, teaching them elementary knowledge about the life of the forest creatures, the history and the philosophy of the owl kind, and then only a few very general facts about their secret knowledge. In the second phase, the professor had to get into all the necessary details, teaching each of his students separately. None of them was allowed to disclose these very special matters ... not even to the members of his own family.

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In the times to which we are referring to now, the customs from the beginning of the school were almost completely forgotten. In fact, the custom that the professor should be an owl was the only thing left unchanged. As far as his students were concerned, anyone could notice that birds of all kinds, with habits and abilities of the most different types, were now admitted to the school. The birds of the forest had fought for a long time for the right to be initiated into the much-appreciated and mysterious teaching of the owls. Once this right was given to them by a professor, nobody doubted the legitimacy of this option, although the conditions of admission to the school had become a secret as well-kept by those who were involved as the old knowledge itself had once been....

Instead, among the owls, there weren't many who still sent their children to the school. The privilege of their kind had disappeared to a great extent, for they didn't have the pushy and vain nature of other birds, and they had gotten used to just minding their own business.

Radical changes appeared also at the level of the disciplines taught in the school. In order to be communicated to so many different creatures, the old teaching had become more and more abstract and devoid of content. For this dangerous impoverishment to be less visible, one of the professors had had at a certain moment the glorious revelation that the old teaching was written in a coded language, without the knowledge of which none of the secret ideas could be understood. This explains how, starting then and continuing up to the times we are referring to, the greatest part of the schoolwork came to concern only the learning of this very complicated language. When all the students, with no exception, finally got to master this language at a level that was satisfactory from the point of view of the professor, the little knowledge that was left from the old teaching was cited in a hurry, and then the understanding of its interpretation was verified as an application of the language that had been acquired with such great effort. In all these exercises of

the school, it wasn't the birds with the greatest natural intelligence who gave the best performance, but those who were ambitious and had a well-trained memory.

Given all these things, the birds who followed the famous school of the professor often proved to be less capable to help their fellows in the forest than they would have been if the natural course of their development hadn't been subject to any "betterment." Nevertheless, because a lot of honest animals could testify at any time that the disciples communicated with each other using an unknown and very elaborate language, nobody could doubt their wisdom and superior intelligence.

Another secret that almost nobody remembered was the fact that the owl who was now the professor hadn't been one of the most remarkable students of his predecessor, but only one who, after finding out by accident about the refusal of all the three owls who had been candidates for this job, took advantage of this situation in order to obtain the position he had wanted for himself as long as he could remember.

Not even this character could remember these details of the past, but he came to be fully convinced that he had been appointed just for his incontestable merits. It was very clear to him that he had been chosen, and he received this honor with a lot of courage, knowing that a life full of efforts and sacrifices awaited him.

Indeed, ten years later, he already felt terribly bored and tired.... A rumor that had become in time a kind of legend of the forest said that the school had become so complicated that none of the last professors had lasted more than twelve years. Most of them died during their term, and several of them disappeared overnight, without a trace.

*

Two months after the elimination of the woodpecker chick, at the time of the autumn equinox, the school was declared closed for the great winter vacation. Like all the other professors he had ever heard about, the owl was a lonely creature, without a family, and this was why that half of the year when he was free appeared to him in a painfully unstable way, either as a delicious prize that brought him the due relaxation and peace after his great work during the school period, or as a dark prison in which he got terribly bored or fell victim to his deepest fears.

How did his life get to be so sad and gray? wondered the owl in the moments that preceded his more and more frequent crises of dismay. He knew that almost all those who knew him expected the existence of such a strong and wise being as himself to be full of joys, of profound and special satisfactions, such as they themselves were never destined to experience. In fact, this was how he also had imagined his life, starting with the time of his childhood and up to a

certain moment, when he managed to become a professor.... But he had long given up hoping for such wonderful things. He saw very clearly that time brought only more and more pain, uncertainty, and confusion to his soul. He couldn't even remember the last time he felt joy with all his heart, such as his young students felt with each of their games and drolleries. Of course, he had tried to solace himself with the thought that these were simple, primary feelings, which an animal superior in knowledge and wisdom couldn't experience anymore. But why didn't this explanation --- which he considered a matter of common sense -- manage to calm him down?

Why did he always feel himself searching for a meaning that his mind wasn't at all able to approach?

*

On that cold day of late autumn, the owl was in a more optimistic mood than usual. Early in the morning he had met two of his students' parents, who thanked him full of gratitude for, as they called it, the "really impressive" evolution of their chicks. The owl had taken advantage of this opportunity to offer his interlocutors several very complicated details about the pedagogical system of the school and about the goals he intended to follow with his students in the coming period of study, which gradually sank the parents into a profound state of amazement and admiration. When they left, the owl enjoyed the title of "Excellency" and the appreciations: "the most remarkable animal of the forest" and "the benefactor of all birds."

After ruminating for a while on thoughts of the most satisfactory kind inspired by this successful meeting, the owl, relaxed, took a nap for an hour or so, and after he woke up, discovered he was a little hungry. With these friendly meetings, he thought happily, a bird forgets about both hunger and thirst. He looked carefully all around the tree he was in and ... blessed surprise! Right beneath him, a plump mouse was relaxing next to a very big root of the tree, which rose over a quite wide piece of ground. With wings stretched wide, the owl let himself fall, without a noise, along the trunk, but in the same moment noticed that the mouse had hidden, in one jump, under the upper part of the root. It was too late for him to choose a totally different maneuver, so he decided to clench strongly onto the trunk with his claws, a wingspan from the base of the tree. Thus he would have one more chance to find the little nuisance unprepared and to draw him out of his hiding place, with only one move.

Lowering his legs horizontally, the owl tried to fasten his claws into the tree's bark, but to his great surprise, he got exactly into a vertical area where the bark was missing. So he didn't manage to grip the tree, but while one of his legs slipped, the other met that part of the bark which bordered the naked area and which, toward this crossing, got further from the trunk, which

appeared as if it had been peeled off.... And so the owl found himself with one leg trapped between the tree and the stripped bark, with the other one in the air, without any support, and with all the rest of his body vertically suspended. Only his chest, fortunately, found a safer support, on the thick, prominent root.

No matter how much he struggled, the poor prisoner couldn't manage to free his leg. From this unnatural position, he tried several times to get up into the air, but his huge efforts proved to be totally useless and, besides, caused some terrible leg aches. So he took a rest, and in the meanwhile, looked for a solution. He thought for a moment that the best way out was to cry for help. Several additional risks could have appeared, since there were enough predators in the forest who would have enjoyed taking advantage of the situation, but he would rather have been heard by one of the countless birds of the forest and, of all these, the owl was fully convinced that there was none who wouldn't have hurried to offer him support. Nevertheless, crying for help meant he acknowledged the humiliating position in which he had managed to put himself ... and this was not a risk, but unfortunately, a sure thing. "It is better to continue trying to free myself by my own powers," he said to himself at once, with much determination, and his heart was suddenly filled, as never before, with a sense of heroism -- a painful and inspiring feeling for himself.

*

Half an hour later, the owl was in the same position, but his body was now soft, completely exhausted; his wings also leaned on the ground, in front of his head, and he had lost consciousness. This was his state when the gray wolf discovered him. He had been running through the forest for a few hours, driven by hunger. He noticed that the bird was still alive and, besides, completely helpless, but no matter how great the temptation to taste of the unexpected prey, the fame of the professor made him stay back. All the carnivores knew that the professors were able to get in touch with the spirits of the forest, and if these became the invisible enemies of any of the animals, they certainly would certainly bring them a rapid and very painful end.

Consequently, after drooling lustfully, the wolf left with regret the place of the temptation. A very short time after he disappeared, from a tree neighboring the one that made a prisoner out of the most respectable owl, two young birds got to the ground, with daring flight: a cuckoo chick and a magpie chick.

"Hey, my friend, I thought the old one was about to die!" said the cuckoo chick, excited.

"No, a stringy and hard meat like our professor's couldn't tempt even the hungriest predator!" answered the magpie chick with an omniscient air. "I'm telling you that I wasn't afraid

even for one moment that something bad might happen to him. But let's check to make sure that the worst hasn't already happened...."

"Yes," said the cuckoo chick with a malicious smile, "if an extreme calamity brought about a merciless fate...."

"Extreme calamity ... you said it well!" agreed the other with so much emphasis that neither of them could refrain from bursting into laughter.

At that moment, the owl woke up from his faint, but hearing the unexpected laughter, decided to remain unmoving, although the pain burnt him so badly that he almost wished he had never awakened.

"Let's yell at him!" said the cuckoo chick, who was the first to calm down.

"Maybe it would be better to get close to him and touch him..." proposed the magpie chick in a shy tone. "It's safer this way."

"Of course," said his friend, "but what if he's dead? I don't want to touch something dead for anything in the world. For our kind, this is the worst thing a bird can do.... You touch him, if you want; I don't mind."

"You are right," answered the magpie chick doubtfully and confirmed this with a lie. "For our kind, it is the same. We can't afford the risk." Then he continued with determination, "This is why we should do as you first said. Let's call him, both of us, several times, with all our strength. I'm absolutely sure that if there is any trace of life in him, we will notice at least a small movement."

"Let's call him, then..." confirmed the cuckoo chick with benevolence, "but of course, before that, let's fly back to the tree where we came from, because if we make such a racket, nobody can assure us that the wolf or another of the same nature will not be attracted to this place. I'm not afraid for ourselves, because our intelligence and youth are the best protection, but I'm thinking about our professor ... in case he's still alive. For as he told us himself more than once when we were his students: 'He who refrained once to fall into temptation will not have the power to do it a second time ... if this occasion appears in a short time after the first one!'"

*

These being said, the two chicks perched on a branch of the tree in front of the owl, and once they had arrived there, began to make a terrible noise. Still, their zeal didn't last longer than all the discussion they had had before. The magpie chick was the first to stop; he looked at the cuckoo chick, then at the owl, who had remained completely motionless, then at the

cuckoo chick once again. The latter also threw a short glance to the owl, and then said, whispering, "Let's get out of here, my friend!"

In the next moment they both got loose from the branch and lost themselves in the air.

*

When silence fell again, the owl found that something totally unexpected began to happen to him: his fury was much greater than his pain. His heart was beating so hard that it almost broke his chest, and he felt very clearly that he began to choke. He fluttered several times spasmodically; then he stopped abruptly and tried to calm down and to breathe better. But as he was concentrating on his breath, the sensation of choking was even stronger.

At a certain moment he thought he would faint again, but before this happened, he heard a rapid wing swish coming from above and, turning his head with a tremendous effort to the left, he noticed on the ground, next to him, the strong legs of a dark-colored bird. This bird leaned over and began to hit with its long and strong beak the dry bark in which the owl's leg had been caught.

"A woodpecker!" said the owl to himself, and joy like a blazing light possessed his soul. His breath calmed down immediately, the rhythm of his heart became normal, and all the owl had time to do was to think gratefully of The Great and Good Spirit of all beings, who hadn't forgotten him in this terrible trial of his life. He slipped down to the earth, freed. He realized immediately that he could not use his wounded leg in any way, but turned slowly on his healthy side and raised his head a little from the earth, to be able to see his savior.

*

But what was this? What he just got was not a magnanimity of The Great Spirit, but on the contrary, an incredible insult ... a humiliation worse than death itself! The owl looked defiantly into the eyes of the woodpecker chick he so frantically hated before eliminating him from the school. He still hated him ... of course, no punishment applied to this rascal could ever make his victim forget what the woodpecker had done to him. Something like that could never be forgotten, nor forgiven.

The woodpecker chick answered with a glance that was just as defiant. "Mr. Professor is served! Will you allow the bad student to draw away from you?"

With an incredible effort, the owl managed to get up to his feet for one moment, and then fell down on the other side. But he turned on the spot, with an unexpected energy. His hypnotic eyes were shining with disdain and fury. "I didn't ask you to do anything for me -- do you

understand, you shameless creature?... Even more, had I known that you were the one to whom I would owe my freedom, you can be sure I would rather have remained hanging there for an eternity. Even if I were to die of pain, of thirst, of hunger, or by the fangs of some merciless animal, it would have been better for me than to owe you even a wilted blade of grass!”

“But you don’t owe me anything, Mr. Professor,” said the woodpecker chick in a very serious tone. “I know very well that you wouldn’t ask and you wouldn’t accept anything from me.... And this is precisely why what happened here is something you don’t have to think about anymore. You didn’t want this to happen, so it was the best motivation for me.... As you had realized a long time ago, all I want is to tease you in all possible ways. So I didn’t do something good for you, but something bad, because I managed to upset you once again, as I had intended...”

“So you admit that, shameless!” yelled the owl, revolted. “Disappear from here, lest I rush toward you! We are not in school now anymore, and even so, wounded and weak as I am, nobody can help you escape from my claws!”

“I’m gone, Mr. Professor!... See you soon!” answered the woodpecker chick in a merry tone, and disappeared into the bushes of the forest.

*

The woodpecker’s best friend was a frail wren chick who had been raised by his grandmother, because both of his parents left him. There had been three brothers, but only he survived. He had, indeed, an optimistic, active, and lively nature. The wren chick was also hanging around when the above-mentioned adventures happened, for, in fact, he had been the one who had told the woodpecker chick about the professor’s accident. When he saw that his friend was leaving, the wren chick also took off, but, to his surprise, the woodpecker chick landed almost immediately on the cut stump of tree, and after his friend joined him, addressed him in a very serious tone.

“If you want to help me, stay around the professor, my dear.... This way you will be able to notify me if something happens. I’m going home to tell my parents and try to convince them to help me enlarge a little that deserted hollow of the old marten, which is right in our tree. We will move the professor there and I will take care of him as well as I can, until he is able to get along again by himself.”

“I will do what you ask me with great pleasure, my friend...” answered the wren chick very seriously, “but, believe me, after all that this individual has done to you, I doubt very much that your family will help you with your plan at all.”

“I’m not very sure myself...” sighed the woodpecker chick thoughtfully, “but do you know something?... I think it wouldn’t be very hard for me to get along by myself. If it’s too hard for you to wait longer, I won’t get upset.”

“Hey, hey...” the wren chick interrupted, agitated, “you know me ... when I say something, I don’t take my word back so easily! You’d better tell me how we will convince your stubborn protégé to move there for a while, and especially, we need to think how we’ll manage to get him up there!”

Two hours and a half later, the wren chick, who had guarded the poor professor with an extraordinary vigilance, heard a short whistle, repeated three times. In the moment that followed this signal, he got down from his observation post and landed on the ground, in front of the professor. He was not right in the place where the woodpecker chick had left him, because he had managed several times to take off and even to land on one of the thickest branches of a nearby tree. But unfortunately, he didn’t manage to keep his balance on only one foot for more than a quarter of an hour. Even worse, in one of these hopeless attempts, he fell down unexpectedly and didn’t manage to recover in his flight, but fell down, with his wings open, at the base of the tree. Nevertheless, he didn’t seem to have suffered a serious injury this time either, because he continued with another dozen unsuccessful exercises.

When the wren chick got close to him, the professor already felt terribly nervous and tired.

“Dear Mr. Professor,” began the little one with great care, “please let me warn you that your wounded leg and your fatigue will not allow you to stay for a long time on a branch of a tree. I would like to propose something to you.”

“I hope you are not looking for ways to have fun at the expense of a helpless old bird!” said the owl abruptly. “I know what the ones your age are up to....”

“Mr. Professor, you have nothing to gain if you doubt my good intentions, without even knowing me. I want to tell you that, only several wing beats toward the east, there is a deserted hollow, which is big and comfortable enough to be a good shelter for you in these days when your wounded leg needs time to recover. If you don’t want to follow me, I can at least call one of your friends whom you trust the most....”

The owl winked quickly several times, confused, then said with a voice which was meant to be very sure: “Thank you very much, but I don’t think it makes sense to disturb any of my friends. Your words have convinced me that you are a young bird of the right sort of character, and I will follow you wherever you think it is best for me.”

When the professor woke up, one evening, one night, and one morning had already passed. He felt quite well, with the exception of the leg, which still hurt, and of the hunger which began to give him the most alarming signs. At the hollow's entrance there was a thick knob chopped above on a surface of the shape of half a duck egg, almost full of rainwater. He had been so delighted after he landed in the hollow, that he hadn't even thought of mentioning to the wren chick something about the second essential problem of his staying there: food. The problem was that, once he had arrived in the wonderful hollow, he would be totally deprived of the possibility of finding something to eat. This danger hadn't even crossed his mind. He was either condemned to perish of hunger here, or, getting down to the ground, to be the victim of a totally unscrupulous carnivore. And a professor like him knew very well that there were enough of those in the forest.

But maybe the wren chick had done all this on purpose and this was, indeed, the confirmation of his first doubt regarding the chick's benevolence. But then he himself was the only one guilty.... After ten years, he kept hoping that some of these bird chicks were, despite all appearances, nice creatures!... What an incredible mistake! What a mistake!

After a bitter meditation on the subject of the youngsters' wickedness, the owl relaxed a little and decided to wait for the appearance of an acquaintance. He turned around with difficulty, and his penetrating eyes discerned in the darkness of the hollow the shapes of some fresh leaves. He stretched a little toward the nearest one and touched it with the wounded leg. To his surprise, the leaf seemed not to lean on anything. He bent cautiously and drew it toward him with his beak. More and more surprised, he drew the next one and then one more. The place was full of brandlings and big red forest ants.

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The woodpecker chick appeared only two days later. He had made a new considerable food provision from his family's table, but had great emotions thinking he would have to face the professor again. And, indeed, his worries proved to be right. As soon as he saw him, the owl rushed to him in a fury.

"Hey, hooligan! Have I invited you here? Or you have thought I would feel the need to see you again?!"

"Mr. Professor, all I'm doing is to help my best friend ... the wren chick," answered the woodpecker chick, marveling at his own inspiration. "He told me he arranged this home for you, during the short period of time necessary to your recovery and, because his mother is very sick, he asked me with tears in his eyes to take care of you until he is back. You can be sure I'm not happy either with this affair...."

“If this is the situation...” said the owl with doubt, “maybe I’ll accept a little help from you, although it isn’t easy for me at all.... But I’m telling you clearly that if this implies, as far as you’re concerned, a reward from me, I’d rather not have anybody help me until the wren chick is back. No matter what the risks are!” The woodpecker chick bowed respectfully as a sign of total agreement with these statements. The owl continued, content: “And were you saying earlier that you brought me something to eat?... Excuse me for telling you, but it wouldn’t be bad if next time you ask me what I prefer, before coming here with the food. The Great Spirit is my witness that I appreciate a lot the good intentions of the wren chick, but unfortunately I’m not in the same mood as far as those red ants are concerned!”

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Several days of silent and devoted assistance on the part of the young woodpecker made the owl meditate a little more on the subject of his elimination from the school. He was convinced that it wasn’t the friendship with the wren chick, but the desire to regain his lost status that determined his former student to take care of him with so much perseverance. And this could not be such a bad thing, because a bird capable of making such efforts in order to come back to school must have had a great respect for the teaching. But was the teaching anything else than the professor? Was it more or less than himself?

Arriving at these reflections, the owl felt terribly touched, and then relented even of his own unexpected sensitivity. Maybe he shouldn’t have taken to heart his critical observations of the woodpecker chick.... After all, he was a daring young bird, full of ideas, who may have expressed his opinions honestly because he trusted and appreciated his professor. The owl decided to be good, in his turn, to his young disciple, so later on, in the evening, when he came with the food, the owl was the first one to greet him and addressed him in a benevolent tone.

“I have thought of you lately, my dear, and I must say that I sincerely regret the fact that you left the school. Please consider yourself accepted again and moreover, free to say anything that crosses your mind, just as you did before. We will review together, starting today, if you wish, the five lessons you have lost.”

The woodpecker chick threw him a surprised, slightly embarrassed glance. “Mr. Professor, I don’t want to upset you again, but I ... really haven’t thought at all about coming back to school.”

“Come on, young bird, don’t be ashamed to admit it! I’m glad you have done all these things for such a noble goal!” said the owl eagerly.

“What have I done?” asked the woodpecker chick, more and more confused.

“You have saved me ... you have taken care of me, your professor. You have done it for the sake of the school -- admit it!” yelled the owl.

“But I haven’t done anything for the sake of the school, Mr. Professor...” said the woodpecker chick with a trace of sadness in his voice. “I thought only of you. I felt the need to do what I did, believe me ... I have no other explanation!”

“All right, all right ... if this is what you want,” the owl said, bored. “But you are coming back to school starting next spring, as we established, aren’t you?”

“No. I don’t want to come back,” whispered the woodpecker chick, embarrassed.

“Did I hear you correctly?!” barked the owl, revolted. “So you are not interested in the school anymore?”

“Not at all!” said the woodpecker chick, excited, after which he turned and took off from the hollow without even bidding the owl farewell.

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After this talk, the owl quickly swallowed the food brought by the woodpecker chick, and then tried for a couple of hours to train his weakened leg. The wound had healed almost completely, and only the fear that he wouldn’t be able to lean on it for very long made him postpone his departure. But now, when he finally realized that only the mercy of this incomprehensible bird had saved his life, all he wanted was to leave as soon as possible that cursed place where his most profound helplessness and humiliation had taken place.

The next morning, when the woodpecker chick came back to the hollow, the owl wasn’t there anymore.

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The spring equinox had to bring with it the beginning of school, like every year. But this time, through several more garrulous acquaintances, the owl spread the rumor that, due to his very fragile health, he was compelled to postpone the meeting with his students for one week, after which he drew away, without anybody knowing it, to the hollow in which he had spent his convalescent days when his leg had been hurt.

The morning after he moved in, an insistent knock on the tree’s bark made him jerk violently. One moment later, the owl was at the hollow’s entrance, and shouted with all his strength while his eyes were searching frantically all around: “Young bird! I want to speak only a couple of words to you!... I implore you, young bird, listen to me!”

His eyes finally fell upon the woodpecker, who had stopped her activity at the owl's very first word and was contemplating him with much curiosity. Only then did the owl notice that in front of him there was, in fact, an old bird, so he said to this bird with shyness and regret: "Excuse me, please -- I mistook you for someone else...."

The woodpecker bowed her head shortly, then took off right away, and the owl came back disappointed to his hollow. He felt as exhausted as if he had hunted the whole night.

He had fallen asleep when he heard the well-known knock. "It's only a dream..." said the owl to himself, and tried not to take it into account.

"Mr. Professor! Mr. Professor!" He heard a timid voice at the very entrance of the hollow.

Dream or not, the owl turned around as if he were pushed by a spring and whispered with a trembling voice, "Young bird, no matter what happens, don't leave! Listen to me.... You don't know how long I've been waiting for you!"

The woodpecker chick was dumbstruck. For one moment he thought that the professor had simply lost his mind.

"I can't start the school without you, do you understand?... If the teaching lost any meaning for the best one of my disciples, then it can't make sense to me either anymore! What use would it be to continue?"

"I am the best?" babbled the woodpecker chick, stunned.

"Aren't you the one who saved me?!" shouted the owl with passion. "My only student who had every reason to hate me and nevertheless ... the only one who did all that could be done for a rascal like me....Without waiting for anything in exchange, not even the smallest reward! Believe me, I can't go forward without you! You will have to save me once again and, together with me, to save everything that has remained of the wonderful wisdom of the old owls!"

"Oh, oh ... why are you torturing me?" babbled the woodpecker chick in a very low tone. "I don't want you to give up your teaching, but I cannot come back to school, either.... And this has nothing to do with what happened between us, believe me."

"Explain to me, my dear!" said the owl mildly. "This is why I am here. You will tell me everything you think I must know, and I will try to understand."

The woodpecker chick looked at him circumspectly for a few moments, after which he took a deep breath and began. "Mr. Professor ... I have no regrets about all that happened. Had you not had the inspiration to expel me from your school, I would have left by myself ... and, as far as my relationship with my parents is concerned, this would have made things much more difficult for me....

“Maybe you are wondering where this strange decision of mine to quit school came from. Well, I decided to do it a while before you expelled me, the day when my best friend, the fieldfare chick, managed to banish his younger brother from his parents’ house. He then came to school and boasted to all his classmates about his wonderful deed. Of course, he couldn’t have done it if his parents hadn’t let themselves be convinced that this is what should happen. And which do you think his unassailable arguments were, dear Mr. Professor?... Nothing else than the supposed lack of intelligence and the uselessness for the bird kind of a young bird incapable of entering your wonderful school. This was enough for some parents who, by their nature, were known in the entire forest as being among the few capable of giving their lives for the sake of their progeny!

“Maybe you think that this fact was an unhappy, isolated event? Nevertheless, I had noticed long time ago that your students became more and more selfish and proud... They, the future advisors of the forest animals? What a joke! I didn’t hear them even once speaking about the needs of those around them, nor telling of a good thing they or someone else had done. All these hard-working disciples are interested in is to appear smart and infused with secret wisdom in front of those who are outside the school, and to win the competitions you often organize, in order to fully enjoy your appreciation and their classmates’ envy!

“Until I saw with my own eyes how much the school can change an innocent soul, I must confess I hadn’t taken these things to heart. But when I found out about that unhappy event, I tried to explain to my friend what a big mistake he had made by chasing his brother away from home. In fact, I was the only one of his classmates who objected to his deed. Do you have any idea of what he said to me, in front of everybody? That if I envy him for the authority he has before his family, I may very well do the same to my own two brothers. Only then will he acknowledge my right to advise him!

“That day I thought for the first time that a school which makes its students such proud and selfish creatures doesn’t deserve to be attended by anyone. Excuse me, Mr. Professor ... this doesn’t mean that it is your fault!”

The owl was thunderstruck. Maybe the teaching was much more than himself ... but the school was himself.... He was the school! He never doubted this idea seriously since he had become a professor. There was a terrible struggle in his heart and for a while, he couldn’t do anything other than sigh deeply, with heavy wings draping along his body, and his head bowed. The woodpecker chick waited for a while, then sighed in his turn and turned to leave the hollow. But all of a sudden he heard behind him the trembling voice of the professor.

“If the school is, indeed, the origin of such acts ... I swear on The Great Spirit that I would rather let myself be torn apart alive than go forward with it, young bird!”

The woodpecker chick turned toward the professor and addressed him mildly. "What is already made cannot be destroyed without doing more bad than good, Mr. Professor. Only you can repair now what has already been broken in the youths' heart, in order to make them better beings than they could become by the simple education given to them by their parents! And if you succeed, this will be enough for them to be the advisors and educators of all forest animals, because only goodness and care for one another are, in my opinion, the springs of true wisdom."

"This is true, my dear friend..." whispered the professor thoughtfully. "And in my opinion, your wisdom is not at all as small as your age..." he continued, and then stopped, because he felt a lump in his throat and his eyes filled with tears. Several moments later, managing to recover, he addressed the woodpecker chick with more strength.

"Maybe there is hope in your idea ... but you will have to help me once again! I am only a fool old bird, benumbed by loneliness. How can I inspire others to be what I never managed to be?"

"What you are now ... this is what matters, Mr. Professor!" exclaimed the woodpecker chick happily. "You will call to yourself all the animals with noble souls and with clear minds, and you will make a new school together. I really don't know what the students will learn there, but I can understand that their good deeds will be a proof that the school's teaching comes, in fact, directly from The Great Spirit!"

"How about you, my chick?" asked the professor, baffled.

"As far as I'm concerned ... if I can be among your new disciples..."

"Come on, don't play with me anymore, young bird," the owl interrupted eagerly.

"Well ... then I promise you very seriously that I will try to show you ... what an obedient student really means!"

The owl bent frowningly toward the woodpecker chick, fixing him with his old inquisitive glance, as if he tried to capture from his eyes the surest testimony of his sincerity. The chick looked at him, completely confused, then looked down and tried to clear his throat.

But just a moment later, the professor began to laugh with all his heart.